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JACKIE





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JACKIE

BY

THE COUNTESS BARCYNKA, *Helene*
Author of "Love Maggy," "Rose o' the Sea," etc.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
ROY HAMMELL



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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JACKIE



JACKIE

I

THE quest of an alleged Amati violin had brought Mervyn Carter into Soho, that home of fiddle makers and dealers. He would have explored a remoter spot to secure such a prize to add to his collection of rare things housed in Riverside Drive, New York City. The Amati, alas, had proved a chimera, a bad German imitation in fact, and Carter had wandered into side streets in the vague hope of discovering some hidden treasure among the stuffy shops of the district, crammed with old jewellery, old lace, old furniture, and bric-à-brac. Of course he had found nothing to satisfy his discriminating tastes.

Carter's time was his own. The May morning was fresh and sunny: one of those exhilarating mornings when even the confined insalubrity of this foreign quarter of the big city does not oppress the intruder. Indeed, its cosmopolitanism was rather attractive to Carter. Here he might imagine himself in some Continental town. The inhabitants, the names over the shops, the very smells, were un-English. There was music, too, of alien rhythm. The resonance of the city's traffic prevented him from catching the tune. He came upon it when he turned a corner — the strident notes of a piano organ that stunned the ear with its suddenness. The usual Italian was at the handle; only his head and shoulders and smiling face were visible; the rest of him was hidden by a small crowd that surrounded the instrument.

It stood facing the shop of a third-rate costumer.

Simultaneously Carter became aware of its windowful of fancy costumes, tinsel, sham armour, and other theatrical ornaments, and between the shoulders of the crowd a bobbing head and flying curls that danced in perfect time to the ground-out music. Five minutes later he was to know that the head and curls belonged to Jacqueline.

Dancing came naturally to Jacqueline. She had the spirit as well as the grace of it. When she danced she really and truly illustrated the poetry of motion. She danced because there was music, because it was spring-time, because her feet impelled her. She danced because she could n't help it. And while she danced she was oblivious of the crowd she gathered. For all that, she liked to know she had an audience. To be able to make people stop and watch her helped her to believe that one day a real audience — a theatreful of people who had paid for their seats — would sit and admire and applaud her as a finished artiste. That was an ambition she never ceased to dream of.

On a window-ledge she had deposited the jug of stout which she had been sent to fetch, and a newspaper containing the fried fish beloved of Madame Lemine, her owner. For Jacqueline in truth was 'owned,' even as a dog or a cat is owned. She was a possession, an acquisition, a piece of child merchandise, and she knew it. This knowledge did not affect her dancing. Mervyn Carter, watching her, wondered if anything could. She seemed born to dance. The quest of Amati violins, of bibelots, of every other *objet d'art*, went out of his head while he stood on the kerb, wondering at the joyous grace of the unconscious girl.

Her movements were quite unstudied; she had very little technique, but she possessed a quaint charm, and all her movements were full of colour. Carter, quick to

discern the symmetrical in nature as well as good craftsmanship in art, was filled with admiration. She was something out of the common, individual; hardly beautiful, though she gave promise of beauty later on. Her speaking little face entranced him. He judged her to be about thirteen. She had a perfect complexion, rather pale, cherry lips, and big brown eyes, soft and velvety. Her hair was a deep golden with darker streaks in it. She was a study in wallflower tints, golds and browns.

The music stopped. The Italian collected pennies and trundled off. Jacqueline came to a standstill and remembered her jug and newspaper. The loiterers dispersed. Carter moved a step nearer. Her spell had not ceased with her dancing.

"Youngster," said he, "you dance well. Who are you? Where do you live?"

She regarded him steadfastly. With the innate suspicion of her class she mistrusted strangers. But this rugged, kind-faced, youngish man, with eyes as blue as the clear sky above, was to her liking. His eyes held her brown ones captive. Hers reciprocated, as blue and brown eyes are apt to do all the world over.

"Jacqueline, m'sieur," she answered. "Jackie, I am called."

"You're French?"

"Since five year I live in England — 'ere." She jerked her head with a half-defiant gesture at the shop behind her. Carter looked at it. Over the crammed window was the legend:

MADAME LEMINE

THEATRICAL COSTUMIÈRE

CHILD ARTISTES TRAINED AND SUPPLIED

It struck him that there was something questionable about the shop: sordid, illicit, difficult to associate with childhood. It looked dark and dirty. The announcement — 'Child artistes trained and supplied' — sounded sinister. His sympathies, readily aroused on behalf of the young, were provoked. He knew something of the methods by which performing dogs were trained. . . . But of course children. . . . No one dared ill-treat children in a civilized country. . . . Even those small unfortunates who had to be trained to perform in public. . . . Yet there were queer smouldering lights in the girl's eyes: the look that one sometimes sees in canine eyes, so human that it will not be cowed or beaten out.

"How old are you?" he asked.

The answer that she "had sixteen years" surprised him. He had thought of her as the child she looked.

"Do you live in there? Are you treated properly? Are you happy?"

Sensitive as a harp string, she responded to the solicitous tone of his question. Her small hands clenched. Then she clasped them over her heart intensely. .

"'Appy, m'sieur?" Five years of Soho had not yet acclimatized her to the English aspirate. "But no. In here I burn; I hate. But one day I go free, and I will dance all through the world and back again. That is when my feet have become much faster. Now I am pupil. I must learn. Even when I am beaten I must not weep. It matters not! I put out my tongue, like that! Who cares? Not Jackie. One day, m'sieur, I know that I will dance on a great stage, and have so much money, to go through the fingers — like that." She illustrated her meaning with a small open palm and extended fingers. "And 'ats, m'sieur! I will 'ave thirty, forty 'ats. And my dresses will be as flowers in the big shop windows, so

many and so beautiful. Ah, yes, every one will speak of Jackie for her 'ats and 'er dresses and 'er dancing. The little birds said so, m'sieur. They know."

"What little birds?" wondered Carter.

"In this street, m'sieur; even last week. Little green birds in a cage telling the fortune. From Italie they come. The woman say to me: 'Bambino, come 'ere. My little birds will tell your fortune for luck.' And the little bird he pick out a piece of paper with his beak, and on it was written, 'Take 'eart; you will be famous.' So I take 'eart, m'sieur, all the time, and I snap my fingers — so! It will come true, m'sieur. There is also a star at night I see out of my window. He twinkle to me like a merry eye and he say: 'God loves Jackie. God will be good to Jackie.'"

She smiled. Mervyn's interest in her was growing fast.

"Tell me some more," he said.

Jacqueline reached for her jug and newspaper parcel.

"Oh, la, la! the fish is cold! That will bring more trouble. Madame like it 'ot. She tell me to run. Then the music play and I forget. Quel malheur!"

She turned and made a dart for the shop door. Carter called her back.

"Look here — Jackie; don't go yet. What's this about your being beaten? Perhaps I may be able to help you. I'd like to. What do you say? Have n't you any relations? Where do you belong?"

"I do not belong, m'sieur. My mother is dead since I cannot remember. My brother and my father are enterrés in France. I refugee. Madame adopt me. Nearly all of us in there are adopt."

"Have you no friends?"

She gave a decisive shake of the head. She was the personification of expository gesture.

"A friend, m'sieur? That is some one who loves and is angry never? Then I have no friends. Madame call me a little devil. Per'aps that is why."

She looked forlorn for a moment. Then a smile flashed out.

"Is it that you are a friend, m'sieur? Your eyes are like my star that twinkle to me. The stars they are merry and kind. Would you be a friend to Jackie?"

Mervyn's hand shot out. It swallowed up hers, so tiny that it felt almost boneless.

"Try me," said he.

Jackie considered.

"I go in now," she said, "or madame will be angered for the delay. Perhaps at two o'clock, if you come back, m'sieur, I could come out while she sleep."

"I'll come back. Sure. Then you'll tell me all about yourself and we'll see what can be done? Friends help each other whenever they can, you know."

From within the shop a raucous voice shrieked: "Jackee! Jackee!"

Jackie blew a kiss to her new friend — an airy salute of finger-tips, half childish, half of the stage — and darted off. The shop door swung to behind her.

And Mervyn Carter continuing on his way thought no more of his quest of the Amati violin or of bibelots and other rare inanimate things, only of a flesh-and-blood rarity with a face framed in gold-brown hair and with brown eyes childish and trustful — Jacqueline's little face which had registered itself with amazing clarity upon his mind and heart.

But, before he left Soho he bought for little Jacqueline a fine silk shawl of wallflower tones like herself, of browns and golds. And he walked on, making all sorts of plans in his head to interest his London sister in his strange 'find';



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to have 'Jackie' taught dancing by the best master obtainable; to help her fortune come true . . . a young man's dreams, quixotic, rather American, and quite entralling. . . .

He lunched at his club, and afterwards in a deep chair in a quiet corner let his thoughts wander back to the little dancer. He was not disturbed and he drowsed. The chime of a clock came as a reminder of his appointment. It was a quarter to two. He started to his feet. By the time he got to Soho 'Jackie' would be waiting.

II

JACKIE'S dance and her talk with Carter had between them consumed half an hour. Madame's reproof for loitering was a smart slap on the cheek and the deprivation of a meagre midday dinner by way of additional correction. Jackie might have come in for further punishment but for a huge, clean-shaven man who lounged into the little shop and distracted the attention of her mistress.

In spite of the warm spring day, he sported a befurred coat, mangy as to the collar, symbol of the actor's prosperity. The coat and the man almost filled the small shop space.

Big Bill Bowman required a lot of room. Most people who knew him gave him a wide berth for physical as well as moral reasons. He was too large and overbearing to quarrel with or offend. He looked what he was, a vicious member of the human species.

Madame Lemine, shuffling out of her dingy inner room, looked almost as unprepossessing as the man. She was ponderous, greasy, irascible. Jackie frankly hated her, but had the sagacity to appreciate that the woman, in spite of the blows and vituperation she dealt out to all her "adopts," was at bottom an artiste. Her unwieldiness notwithstanding, she could teach dancing and posture; and Jackie was eager to be taught. All her short life that had been her attitude — spirit in adventure, but humility in art.

Madame Lemine did a good deal of business with Big Bill Bowman. He owned the acting rights of a tried and popular melodrama with which for years he had toured the smaller towns, and he came to Madame whenever he

required a child-actress or a second-hand costume. She could supply both at short notice. She owned the shop, the costumes, and the children. She adopted children for "love"; gave them a profession "out of the goodness of her heart," to use her own phrase; owned them body and soul and lived upon their earnings. At times she sailed perilously near the wind in her traffickings; but retribution in the form of the arm of the law had not yet reached her. She knew her game and played it too discreetly for detection.

With a show of cordiality she invited Bowman into the inner room. He was a good client. He paid well and promptly.

"What is it now?" she enquired. "Has not that little one, Rosie, satisfaction given? You bring her back?"

Bowman frowned heavily.

"I've not got her in my pocket, if that's what you mean. She's in hospital. I want another kid to take her place from Monday next. If you've got one I'll take her now. Rosie won't be any good for weeks. I've got her free hospital treatment, thank the Lord. She's off our hands — yours as well as mine — for the time being."

Madame looked approval.

"Tell me 'ow it 'appen," she said.

"This way. I told you I'd got a new bit of business into my second act. I wanted a kid with nerve to stand still while I did stunts with a stock-whip. I've lived in Australia, you know. Well, years ago, out West, I did that for a turn on the halls, and it struck me it would take on well if I could work it into the play. There was no acting required. All the kid had to do was to stand still with her neck up ready for me to curl the whip round it. Well, the chicken-livered little fool did n't stand still. She funked and side-stepped. Consequence was she got

a bad slash. She'll be back with you inside a month, but she's no good to me. I've got to have a kid with ginger in her, a real good plucked 'un. Ain't you got something of the sort? I'll pay you more than I gave for Rosie. Hang it, I'll give you two quid a week. But she must be worth it, mind!"

Madame appeared to cogitate.

"I have one," she said presently, "a French child. 'Er mother was in the corps de ballet. When she die she owe me money, so I 'ave to nourish the little one. She dance ver' well. I teach her myself. She worth three pound a week, any day. Next year I put her on the halls, I t'ink."

"Well, if she's a dancer so much the better. I can easily work in a dance for her. That's the best of 'Dead Men's Shoes.' It's a play you can put chunks into anywhere. In fact, there's not much of 'the author' left in it, though I have to pay the blighter his royalties just the same. Let's have a look at the kid, madame."

Jackie was called. She came in, wondering what was in store for her this time. She expected another scolding for anything or nothing. But to-day she was curiously indifferent to scoldings or even blows. In two hours Madame Lemine would be sleeping, and herself once more with "the m'sieur with the kind eyes that twinkled like her star." In a vague way she associated him with that star. Perhaps he was her mascot. Who knew? At any rate, she was sure of one thing — she liked him. It would be lovely to have him for a friend.

She took an immediate dislike to the big man standing by Madame's side. His forceful, domineering personality impressed itself upon her before he had spoken a single word. She stood still, waiting to hear what they had to say to her.

Bowman, appraising her with the eye of a showman, coolly took in her points. She was only a child, but even so, with her mouth shut, staring at him out of her big eyes, her individuality was very distinctive. She was "some" kid. Those eyes had snap in them.

"So you're Jackie?" he said. "You've got nerve, have n't you? Madame here says so."

"What you call nerve?" enquired Jackie.

"Spirit. Not afraid. You would n't be afraid of me, or of getting hurt, for instance?"

He was answered by a quick shrug and a more expressive movement of the face, disclosing the tip of a pink tongue.

"You are only a great big man," said she, with the fine contempt of a true daughter of Eve for mere brute force. Child as she was, the innate power of her sex was latent within her, giving promise of its effects in years to come. "You would not hurt me, I think. Madame do that every day. I don't care."

Madame outspread hands that could rain shrewd blows.

"It is necessary to beat in order to teach," she mumbled. "One day you will thank me, ingrate."

The "ingrate" gave another shrug. Bowman put his hand on her shoulder.

"You're coming along o' me," he said. "I shan't hurt you if you do what you're told. I might break you if I started in. You're such a bit of a thing. All you've got to do is to learn a small part and try to speak it without too much of your funny foreign accent. You shall have a dance, too, if you're good. And you'll have to stand quiet while I make the long lash of a whip curl round you. Soft as a creepin' snake, so long as you don't move."

"I could stand still even if you shoot," replied Jackie

indifferently. She knew of such circus tricks. But she finished up with her stock phrase, "I don't care."

"Well, that shows spirit, anyway," grinned Big Bill. "Nothing like spirits in human or bottle form, say I. Keep up your spirits and you'll get on, perhaps, one of these days, my kid. I'll take her now if she's ready, Madame. I'm catchin' the one-forty-five from Victoria to Cradeley. That'll give you all to-morrow, being Sunday, to rehearse," he informed Jackie.

Sunday had never been a rest day with Jackie. She always expected and got the same amount of discipline and practice on Sundays as on week days. There was no seventh day repose for child artistes in Madame Lemine's system of training. But one-forty-five! Her appointment with m'sieur was for two o'clock! She was not going to miss him if she could help it, not even to get away from Madame.

"I will come later," she said. "Not now. Per'aps not at all. I do not know."

Bowman frowned. Madame spluttered.

"You say that?" she shrilled. "You — my élève, my adopt! You have no voice to say anyt'ing at all!"

"Oh, have I not?" stormed Jackie, instantly accepting the challenge with a sudden volcanic outburst that amazed the woman and the big showman.

Jackie did not often get into a real rage. Her powers of endurance, of forgiveness and forgetfulness, were remarkable. But now she was a whirlwind, a defiant fury, a spitfire tiger cub, ready to fight or rend. She was fighting for her appointment at two o'clock. Neither wild horses nor big men should drag her away until she had kept it. Her English no longer sufficed. She rattled on vociferously in her native tongue.

Bowman, with a tolerant grin, went out of the room

and left her at it. His object was to fetch a taxi. The settlement of the matter would be easier of accomplishment with a vehicle handy at the door. He was back again in a few minutes. Jackie's rage had abated somewhat, but she was white and shaking, standing her ground.

"Time's up," he announced. "And the train won't wait. Now, then, kid, don't swear in French. It's waste of breath, because I don't understand it. Never mind her hat, Madame. I'm pressed for time."

He picked Jackie up as though she were a baby or a feather, tucked her under his arm, put his free hand over her mouth, and swiftly deposited her in the waiting cab. Her natural agility availed her nothing against his vast bulk and strength. She might as well have tried to wrestle with an elephant.

When the cab started he let go of her. On the instant she made a dive for the door. But he was as quick.

"No, you don't! No tricks, now, or you'll be sorry. Why don't you come quiet like a sensible kid? I've told you I won't hurt you unless you deserve it."

Jackie's tears suddenly flowed. Not for years had she wept.

"Oh, I entreat you!" she cried piteously. "Let me go. Till three o'clock. At three o'clock I will return. I swear it!"

"Swearing be blowed! What's the odds between one-forty-five and three?"

The difference to Jackie was immeasurable; as Dan is to Beersheba; as light is to darkness.

"At two o'clock I meet a friend," she declared intensely. Bowman laughed.

"What sort of friend? Man, girl, what?"

"My friend is a milord," she flashed out.

He gave her a wondering look. No swell in his opinion

would bother his head about such an elfish-looking creature. She was too young and too immature to arouse masculine admiration. And yet — he tilted up her chin roughly — there certainly was something intriguing about the little face. . . . He patted her arm.

“You don’t want to make friends with strangers,” he said with rough affability. “You put melords and such-like out of that little head of yours. More likely he’s just a dud.”

Jackie went crimson with indignation.

“I tell you,” she cried, “that my friend, he is a milord — gentil. You are too big for me to fight, or I would fight you; but if you do not set me free for one little while till three o’clock, I will hate you all my life!”

“Hate away,” grinned Bowman. “I’m kind of used to that.”

At the station he kept a firm grip of her hand. She saw the futility of struggling and stood by his side, seemingly docile. But all the while her heart felt bursting. She had meant to meet her m’sieur at two! She had *meant* to be there!

And at two-fifteen, when Jackie was well on her way to Cradeley, Mervyn Carter, in a flurry because he was late, jumped out of a taxi and scanned the street for Jackie and scanned it in vain. She was nowhere to be seen. He waited ten minutes. Then after some hesitation he went into the shop.

Madame had seen him pass and repass the window and suspiciously asked herself the reason. Her experienced eye told her that he was no “theatrical.” He was of another world, seemingly the world of prosperity. But then also that might be a pose — camouflage.

“Sale agent de police, va!” she muttered to herself, and was on her guard.

"You train children for the stage, do you not?" Carter asked. "I'm interested in a protégée of yours. I want to see her if I may. Jacqueline is her name."

"Jacqueline?" repeated Madame vaguely.

"Or Jackie."

Madame shook her head.

"M'sieur," she smiled, "you 'ave made a mistake. I know of no little one called Jackee. My pupils, all of them, are practising now in the studio. Would m'sieur care to see?"

Carter followed her through a labyrinth of cupboard-like rooms into a so-called studio at the back of the house. Some ten children, mostly girls, were practising acrobatic and dance exercises of various kinds. Jackie was not one of their number.

Disappointed, Carter turned away, and Madame accompanied him back to the shop.

"A mistake, is it not? I am sorry I cannot 'elp m'sieur," she said.

Carter wheeled round, fixing her with hard eyes. They did not twinkle always. They had a look of steel at times — cold steel.

"I met that little girl, Jackie, outside here an hour or two back," he asserted. "As to my being mistaken, I'm quite sure I am not. She said she lived here, and I believe her. I'd believe a child with a face like hers if she told me she was Empress of China. And what's more, I'm going to find her somehow if it takes me years to do it." He paused to let his words sink in. "Won't you change your mind and tell me where she is?"

Madame Lemine's face took on an expression of stupidity — and obduracy.

Carter turned on his heel and swung out of the shop. The woman watched him go, surprised, a little afraid;

speculating on his earnestness and his protests, which to her guilty mind implied a threat and possible punishment.

As for Carter, his quest of the antique, of treasure of bygone days and long-dead craftsmen, was completely obliterated by a baffling sense of regret and disappointment.

Somewhere, lost to him, and now, because lost, doubly and inexplicably precious, was an atom of childish flotsam — Jacqueline.

And that was all he knew of her. Just a name! Jacqueline — Jackie!

III

"DEAD MEN'S SHOES" on garish picture-posters was billed to appear for "three nights only" at the Theatre Royal, Cradeley. The members of its company lodged where they could in the little town. Bowman installed himself at the best inn, together with one or two of his principal men and a hunchback, known as Bent Benny, whom he spoke of as his nephew. For Jackie other accommodation would have to be found. The inn, "The Green Feathers," was full, but in the garden there was a summer-house, fitted up as a bedroom of a kind, and this Bill thought might be allotted to her. He did not deem it advisable to hand her over to the care of any of the women-folk in his show. He had an idea she would try to run away. He meant to keep her under observation.

In the train on the way down Jackie had succumbed to Destiny. Now that it was too late to meet her unknown friend she saw the futility of escape. For the present, at least, she would defer the attempt. A fatalistic docility descended on her. She did not detest Bowman any the less because he was the cause of her terrible disappointment, but she saw the uselessness of showing it. This apparent docility raised her in the actor's estimation. He rightly deemed her full of intelligence, and argued that she would be worth the two pounds a week he would have to pay for her. Indeed, after some talk he began to be convinced that she might turn out to be a theatrical "find." The policy of catching the potential actress young and before she could realize her own worth was one he followed whenever it presented itself.

Obscure actor though he was, Bowman had the business

instincts of a successful showman. Indeed, in his way he was prosperous, and worth a good deal more than most people would have supposed. He continued to size Jackie up. When he learnt her age he, too, like Mervyn Carter, was surprised. He looked at her more closely. She wore a frock suitable to a child of twelve, a garment made in one piece without fit. It hid any shapeliness of form or limb that she might possess. Bowman could guess at her concealed physical gifts. He was sure that suitably and daintily dressed, she would look vastly different.

"Look here," he said, "if you're a good kid and work hard, there's no saying what I might n't do for you. Hang it, I'd buy you some clothes."

He, this coarse big man, buy her clothes? The idea was an outrage! She wanted clothes, yes; a shopful; the gayest and the best. And one day she would buy them for herself — the hats and the dresses that should be the crown and sign-manual of her ambitions. Had not the little birds said so? But she would take nothing from her gaoler, clothes least of all. She made a face.

"Oh, clothes! What are they?" she said indifferently.

"You'll have to have new ones of some sort. You're a disgrace to a respectable company as you are now. I'll take you to one of the shops on Monday and rig you out. Well, here we are. Strikes me what you want is a cup of tea and something to eat. You look fair starved. Perhaps you'll feel less of a spitfire after it."

At the inn, close to the station, he took her to a room that reeked of stale beer and smoke. In it a crippled boy sat on a tattered sofa reading an equally tattered book.

"This is the kid who's going to take Rosie's place, Benny," he said. "I'm going to send her in something to eat. If she tries to clear out you're to stop her. Understand? I've got to go down to the theatre."

The boy nodded. He hardly glanced at Jackie. He seemed listless and indifferent. Bowman went out, shutting the door behind him. Jackie looked at it, looked at the window, stood listening to his retreating footsteps. The boy went on reading.

A woman came in with a tea-tray. Jackie, deprived of her dinner, avidly regarded a glass jar of jam, two slices of cake, a plate with butter on it. She savoured the good odour of hot toast. She was famished and moved to the table when the boy did. He poured out the tea.

While she raced through the sorely needed meal she looked at him. He was a nice-looking boy, about seventeen. Apparently he had suffered some injury to his back. But for this his physique was good. He moved with the difficulty and debility of the aged. She felt sorry for his helplessness. Then the thought struck her that there was nothing to prevent her from escaping. The boy was physically incapable of restraining her. So she left her chair and made straight for the door. The boy sat still.

"If you run off," he said quietly, "Bill Bowman will lick me to-night till I'm half dead."

Jackie's hand dropped from the doorknob. She came slowly back and looked at him across the table.

"You speak the truth?" she asked.

He lifted his eyes to hers, pathetic eyes with the look in them of a spirit crushed.

"Yes. God's truth."

"Then I do not go." She sat down again, put her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands, and as though the ice of intimacy were broken, continued in an easy way, "I not like that man. Coming 'ere in the train I tell him I would hate him for ever and ever."

"That's a bad start. You wait. He'll give you hell for that — and other things, I expect."

"'Ell?" quoth Jackie callously. "I come from there, Madame say, so what matters it?"

"He'll beat you if he's angry or if he's drunk."

Jackie's shoulders went up.

"I am accustomed to that. Does 'e beat you?"

"Yes. He takes it out of me when there's no one else. He knows I can't hit back." The assertion was made dispassionately. Jackie felt her temper rising, but she said nothing. In the same dull way the boy went on; "Look here, it was cowardly of me to say what I did just now. I called you back because I was afraid of what he'd do to me. It was n't the square thing. After all, an extra hiding won't kill me. If you want to, you quit while you can, and when he comes back I'll say I was asleep."

Jackie did not move.

"Why don't you go?" he asked.

"I would not go now that you may be beaten," she declared with a vigorous shake of the head while the colour mounted in her cheeks. "But" — she sighed — "it is too late now. I forgot that. At two o'clock everything was different. Instead I will stay to hate Bill Bowman." She spat out the name savagely.

"What was going to happen at two o'clock?"

Jackie plunged into a vivid account of her encounter with her m'sieur. She described Mervyn Carter with a wealth of detail and a vocabulary that was as complex as her gestures were foreign.

Benny did not appear to be impressed.

"What's your name?" he enquired.

"Jackie."

"I don't think you've missed much," he said. "I reckon you've got sort of Fairy Prince ideas in your head. I was like that once. When you get older you'll find there

are guys all over the place asking girls to make appointments with them, specially girls on the stage. That sort are n't up to any good, not one in a thousand. It never gets you any forrarder, mooning about with boys."

"I tell you 'e was not a boy. 'E was a milord. 'E would 'ave been my friend," she added with a quaver in her voice and an entire absence of h's.

"Well, things have fallen out so's he can't be. It's no more use kicking against Fate than it would be to kick against Bill Bowman. I've learnt some things lying about all these years. Philosophizing, it's called. If you can't have the thing you want most, make do with what you can get. You're here now and you'll have to stay, I reckon. How about you and me being friends? I want one. I guess I'd worship a little chum like you. I know I'm not much good. I can't move about like other people. Bill says I'm only cumbering the earth." His lips trembled. "That's his doing. If it was n't for him I'd be straight in my back, not crooked and in pain most days."

"Tell me," said Jackie. Spontaneous of nature, all moods and sympathies, she was by this time definitely attracted to Benny. His helplessness appealed to her lonely, lawless little heart.

"It was in New York nine years ago that Bowman happened on me," said Benny. "I was a kid of eight, selling papers, and I was crazy about the stage. Bowman was doing the strong-man stunt, and he wanted a kid to demonstrate with. I asked for the job and got it. He was n't so bad those days. One thing, he did n't drink so much. After a time we came to England, and he kind of altered. Started drinking heavy and losing his physique. Sometimes he was n't sober when we played. I was in mortal terror then, being his human dumb-bell. One

night on the trapeze he was swinging me round with his teeth — and he let go. There was n't any net. I fell on the boards. That's all."

Benny's quiet and emotionless voice brought a lump into Jackie's throat and the tears to her eyes. She caught his hand and pressed it to her cheek. She felt so awfully, terribly sorry for him, that if she could, she would then and there have given him her own straight, lithe limbs in place of his aching back and dragging legs. All this he saw in her speaking face. It bade him hasten to discount the effect of his story. It had been far from his intention to harrow her feelings.

"I suppose I ought to have been grateful he did n't scrap me. He's kept me ever since, if that's anything to his credit; and he calls me his nephew and tells every one how good he is to me. Good! Why, he'd leave me in a ditch any day if he'd no use left for me."

"What do you do now?" Jackie asked.

"I'm 'Bent Benny' in 'Dead Men's Shoes,'" he said with a bitter laugh. "I've got the cripple's part. I see the murder done in the first act, and I rescue the kid — that'll be you — coming across a broken bridge. I carry you."

"But 'ow? 'Ow can you do that?"

"Oh, I *have* to do it. The press say my acting of a cripple boy is masterly. They don't know I'm the real thing. After that scene I faint off in the wings, most times. Don't take any notice if you see me at it. Bill generally brings me to with a kick."

Jackie's eyes flashed and her hands clenched.

"The beast!" she cried. "I could tear him like — so, with my 'ands!"

It was like balm to Benny's bruised soul to listen to such sympathy. It almost gave physical relief to his

injured body. Jackie's passionate outburst was a safety-valve to his own pent-up feelings.

"Yes. He's a devil," he agreed. "He's a devil when he's in drink, and also when he —"

He stopped short, but the face opposite asked questions.

"When — when he takes a fancy to a girl," he stammered.

Jackie's eyes were wide, innocently wide.

"You'll be all right," he made haste to say. "He won't think about you. You're not old enough. But the way he's treated some of the girls in the company. . . . Like me, he's treated them. Human dumb-bells. Spoiling their lives, same as he's spoilt my back. I tell you there is n't a white spot anywhere in Bill. He's black all through."

Jackie reached for his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"I am your friend now, Benny, is it not?" she said.

"I will be your sister."

A timid, tender expression leapt into Benny's eyes. He held on to the little hand. The fraternal offer put courage into him. His next words were so full of passion that they almost scared her.

"And I'll be your brother," he declared. "And as for Big Bill, if he ever so much as tries to hurt a hair of your head I — I believe I'd get the strength from somewhere to — to lay him out!"

The face that had seemed so passive and cowed shone with a new light. It told of defiance of Bowman and allegiance to Jackie — the chivalry of youth and a beautiful devotion.

The boy and the girl were sitting with clasped hands when Bowman returned. Neither heard him until he banged the door to.

“Hulloa!” he sniggered derisively. “What’s this? An unrehearsed effect? Come on now, Jackie. Life is n’t all tea, toast, and billing and cooing. Rehearsal in half an hour. You’re here to work, savvy?”

IV

At rehearsal that afternoon Jackie astonished Bowman. She "fair took his breath away." She was an "eye-opener." And in more senses than one. He congratulated himself on his acquisition; he patted himself on the back on his "discovery." The credit was all his; none of it was due to her talent and intelligence.

Directly Jackie felt the boards of a stage under her feet as she was at home and in her element. It came as natural to her to act as to dance. She liked her small part of "Pansy," a circus child in "Dead Men's Shoes." In the solo dance which Bowman introduced for her she was the airiest thing he had ever struck. She simply "knocked" him. She would "bring down the house." She delighted and amazed him in the stock-whip scene. She stood like a statue. She faced the menace of the heavy thong with the crackling lash at its end without the flicker of an eyelid. Not a girl in a thousand would have shown such pluck.

Moreover, at this rehearsal she asserted herself. It was in the scene where Benny had to carry her across the bridge. She stopped in the middle of it to protest.

"What's that you're saying, young Jackie?" Bowman, still in high good-humor, asked genially. "What? Won't be carried? Why not?"

Jackie's reason was inspired by consideration for Benny's affliction, but she was far too quick-witted to say so.

"Do you not see it spoil everyt'ing?" she complained. "Just now you tell me I am an artiste. It is not artistique to 'ave me picked up like a baby. I will be dragged along.

So." She demonstrated what she meant. "Is not that better?" To Benny she whispered: "Pretend to support me only. I will drag myself."

So well did she disguise the effort that Bowman failed to detect the subterfuge. He thought it effective.

"Oh, well, have it that way if you like," he said with a shrug and a grin. "Perhaps you'd like to take the rehearsal instead of me. And I'm not sure you could n't do it, either," he added to himself.

A little later he was unable to restrain his gratified feelings.

"Blest if she is n't the best kid we've ever had in the show!" he declared. "Jackie, you go on like that and you'll shine as an A1 star one of these fine days."

"That is what I already know," she rejoined with the calmness of one who has complete faith in her destiny. "But I will not be *your* star."

At that, Bowman's laugh was less good-tempered. Her declaration, made before the "crowd," was too much like insubordination. Bowman did not like being "sauced" in their hearing.

"Going into management on your own, I suppose?" he jeered. "You're not through with *me* yet: I don't suppose you'll have quite so much to say this time next week. Now, then, ladies and gentlemen, Act IV, please. Winter, your cue, and don't come on looking as if you'd taken an emetic. Remember you've just come into ten thousand a year. Try and look like it. Can't you keep that cough quiet?"

None of the company smiled at the bad jest or the callous reference to Winter's ailment. They all knew, Bowman included, that nothing would cure it except death, an event not likely to be very remote. They knew, too, of a sad incident in the life of his daughter Milly,

now playing in another company. Bowman was responsible for that trouble. Bad health and the unlikelihood of finding work in any other company had kept the old actor tied to a man whom he had the strongest of reasons for detesting. He and Benny, martyrs both to Bowman's brutality, were close friends. Winter was always doing the boy a kindness. He it was who elected to push Benny's Bath chair to and from their lodgings to the theatre in which they might be playing. Out of good-heartedness, too, not out of fraternity towards his manager, he generally lodged where they did.

Rehearsal over, Bowman went off with Jackie. Benny in his Bath chair, pushed by Winter, followed more slowly.

"Clever kid that," said Winter. "The way she stood up to the gov'nor was fine! Who's she going to live with? Mrs. Mant?"

"No, the boss has fixed her up in the summer-house at the 'Feathers.'"

Winter stopped pushing. Benny glanced at him over his shoulder.

"It is n't so bad," he said.

"Is n't it? I had to sleep there last night till a commercial cleared out this morning. It's damp. And the door does n't lock. There's that wood at the side, too. No end of tramps about. Enough to scare a girl of her age."

"She's a good-plucked 'un," ruminated Benny. A few yards farther on he said: "Then it's not the boss you're afraid of? You don't think he'll get sweet on her?"

Winter's reply came after a pause.

"No. But I'm going to tell him he ought to let her stay with some of the women."

"He'll be mad if you do."

Winter's face took on a resolute expression.

"I've got to have a talk with him anyhow," he said. "I had a letter from my Milly to-day, with a message for him."

He pushed the chair on. Silence fell between the man and the boy. The thoughts of each traversed the same path. Both harboured a deep and ineradicable hatred of Bowman. Presently the younger one voiced them.

"I wonder something — something awful — does n't happen to him," he broke out suddenly. "I know him, and so do you. He is n't fit to live. There is n't a good thing or a kind word I've ever known him do or say. Do you remember how he laughed when he cut Rosie with his damned whip?"

A low curse came from Winter. The sound of it inflamed Benny.

"I — I feel like killing him sometimes! I do! And I would if . . ." He tailed off inarticulately.

Winter broke a moody silence.

"It's a mistake to talk like that, Benny. He's made me feel more bitter than you can dream of, on account of my girl. But I keep my feelings to myself. They don't do him or me any good."

If Bowman had been aware of Benny's threat and his fear lest he should "get sweet" on Jackie, he would have been amused. He only thought of her as a young spitfire, but a spitfire "with money in her." So far that was all that interested him. He hardly spoke a word to her on the way back to the inn. When they got there he showed her the bedroom in the summer-house, left her in it, and went to fetch the small travelling basket which contained the clothes for her part.

"There you are," he said. "That's your wardrobe. You'd better try the things on now."

Jackie took the dresses out of the basket, spangled gauze skirts, tights, and a kind of Peter-Pan suit.

"What are you looking so glum about, Miss Particular?" queried Bowman. "Don't you like your room?"

"The room does not trouble me," she replied. "One day I will have a gold bed and carpets of silk. It is this dress I do not like. It will not fit. It is too small. It is for a very little girl."

"What else are you, I'd like to know? You try it on at once. I'll tell you whether it fits or not. You'll find me in the parlour. And be sure and put that dust-cloak over you. I'll have my costumes treated carefully. And don't you try to run off, because I can see from the window."

He left her, banging the door behind him in spleen. Rehearsals never improved his temper, and this was the hour when he usually hankered to begin quenching his thirst. He did so now in the bar, before going into the parlour, where he found Benny and Winter.

Winter had also had a drink, a rare thing with him. But he had felt the need of a little Dutch courage before tackling Bowman on two matters that troubled him.

"Guv'nor," he commenced, "I don't want you to take it amiss, but that new child ought n't to sleep outside. Why can't she put up with Mrs. Mant? I slept in the summer-house last night, so I know what it's like. It's damp, and the door does n't lock."

"You mind your own business," growled Bowman. "The kid's no concern of yours. Do you think she's scared of mice?"

"I dare say not. I was thinking more of men — tramps. I've seen one or two about. It is n't a proper place for her," he added doggedly.

Bowman jeered at him.

"Blooming old woman you are! Anything else you'd like to say?"

"Yes. I've heard from — from Milly. There's a message for you."

Winter took a letter from his pocket and handed him one of the sheets. Bowman scowled as he took it. When he had read it he tore it up and flung the pieces into the empty grate.

"That's all there is to that," he said disdainfully. "I'm not called on to provide for every girl who wants a husband. You can tell her I've no objection to her joining the company again if she likes. But, mind you, that's as far as I'll go. She's got no hold on me, and she'd better understand it."

It would be hard to say which of the two — Winter or Benny — was the more stung by his callousness. Winter's frail frame quivered, but his age and malady seemed to weaken his spirit and make him impotent to resent it. But Benny's face was inflamed with a fierce rage. He felt the lost strength of his athletic boyhood surging back into his body, stiffening it to a bitter revenge on Winter's account as well as his own. He knew, better even than Winter, how Bowman, by means of threats and lies and cajolery, had debauched the actor's daughter and then, tiring of her, had openly broken down every remnant of her pride. It was but one of many incidents of the kind, for Bowman, bully and libertine and coarse though he was, had a way with a woman when he was sweet on her.

"You've spoilt her life," lamented Winter. "She'll never hold up her head again!"

"Pooh!" scoffed Bowman. "What she could do with is a bit more spirit. Like that kid, Jackie. A bit more —"

He came to a sudden stop as Jackie herself flung open the door and burst into the room, a miniature whirlwind in a dust-cloak. This she cast from her passionately and stood, panting, clad in the spangled dress she had complained of. It was too small. It exposed nearly as much of her as it covered. It revealed her, not as a child, but as a very shapely girl on the verge of womanhood. The limitations of the dress bore witness to the exquisiteness of her figure.

"Attend! This is what I will not wear!" she cried in a frenzy. "The hooks, they do not meet. I strangle! I burst!"

Bowman said not a word. He did not even appear to be angry. As though hypnotized he went up to her and laid a conciliatory paw on her curly head.

But Benny, who knew every phase of his cruel nature, his moods and deviltries, saw in that intent gaze of his what Jackie in her innocence and inexperience could not possibly guess at.

Big Bill was "sweet" on Jackie. . . .

V

THROUGH the tiny window of the summer-house a star peeped at Jackie. She was sure it was her own bright star. It made her think again of her "m'sieur," with the kind, twinkling eyes; and before she slept she breathed a quaint request to St. Anthony, restorer of missing objects to those who rightly beseech him, to give her back in due course her lost "milord."

She did not at all mind the isolation of her bedroom. Its outdoor situation gave her the feeling of being nearer to Mother Nature (whom all unknowingly she worshipped), the watching trees and the dreaming flowers. Besides, fear of any kind was foreign to her. In her simple trust she believed in God's ability to take care of her.

As she lay in her camp-bed she thought drowsily of the new people who had crowded into her life that day. First and foremost came her m'sieur; Bowman, whom she would continue to hate whatever favours he might bestow on her in the way of stage frocks; Benny with the suffering face; and John Winter with the sad, sorrowful eyes.

The two latter had both been very silent that evening. Benny had seemed alert and watchful. In a dim way she had the conviction that he was guarding her. It made her feel additionally safe and protected. . . .

With that thought in her mind she fell asleep, deeply and dreamlessly, and did not wake till early morning.

A church bell was striking six. The sun, with early summer warmth, was streaming in at her window. An oratorio of bird music clamoured to her to get up, to

breathe the summer morning, to wade through dewy grass, to gather flowers.

She sprang out of bed and dressed at speed. She felt immensely alive; a song was on her lips. But as she pushed open the door it changed to a startled cry.

Right close up to the door, on the step, doubled up, lay Bill Bowman.

For a moment she thought he was asleep and wondered why. But his contorted face sent the belief flying. With hesitating fingers she bent and shook him. He did not stir. Then for the first time in her life fear seized on her, for close beside him she caught sight of a knife — a knife spotted and stained . . . and on the ground beneath his body another and a larger stain, a horrid ruddled patch . . .

But it was the knife rather than the bloodstains that unnerved her. It made her mind jump to a definite conclusion. It did not explain what had brought Bowman there, but it instantly pointed to the identity of his assailant.

For the knife was Benny's, a property one used by him in the play. Yesterday, after rehearsal, Bowman had told him to bring it back to the inn to be sharpened. During the evening the former had shown it to Jackie and had pointed out with some pride that it was of Indian origin, and drawn her attention to the hilt, once encrusted with precious stones, long since removed. His imagination, stimulated by overindulgence in spirits, conjured up for her edification pictures of a sanguinary past in which the knife had wickedly figured.

Benny had not joined in this conversation. He had sat broodingly apart in the watchful attitude which Jackie at the time had remarked. But he had looked intently at Bowman when he jestingly offered her the knife in case

she would like it as a protection at night. Not taking the offer seriously, she had declined it, handed it to Benny, and soon afterwards had gone off to bed.

And now here it was beside the prostrate body, sure evidence seemingly of Benny's guilt!

Without a moment's hesitation she snatched it up and wiped the blade on the grass. She did it with the dire feeling that the whole universe was a witness to the act but that did not prevent her from removing every vestige of blood. Once more she stepped over the huddled figure that blocked the doorway into the summer-house. Her eyes searched it for a place in which to conceal the knife. Soon the alarm would be given. People — the police, perhaps — would be clamouring about the body, looking for a weapon. She did not doubt that Benny had killed Bowman. True he was a cripple and slow of movement, but he could walk. And when people were desperate strength came to them. Had not Benny expressed the deepest hatred of Bowman? Had he not said, "If he so much as hurt a hair of your head, I believe I'd get the strength to lay him out!"

Jackie's active brain began reconstructing the happenings of the night. For some reason Bowman had come out — perhaps to make sure she had not run away. Benny must have seen him start and followed him in the darkness. . . . Her paramount idea was to screen Benny. He had done this awful thing because he mistrusted Bowman and probably thought he intended doing her some harm. Benny had said that when he drank he was a devil. He had been drinking last night. Until this moment she had not attributed any sinister motive to Bowman; but now she remembered having sensed danger from him. She could not explain to herself what it was. All she knew was that his manner had undergone a sudden and subtle

change. She had seen it in his face, a something that had aroused in her a great repugnance and a great animosity.

None the less was she appalled by the deed. In spite of her own lawless temperament she was innately gentle. Revenge was foreign to her nature. That was because she was a girl. Men, she knew, were different. Men's tastes were bloody. The Great War had shown it. The everyday life of Soho showed it too. And that was why Benny, poor maimed Benny, had nursed his wrongs and his hate until they had driven him to momentary madness resulting in this crime.

Her first instinct was to secrete the knife. This she did in her stocking. Then, with trepidation, she once more approached the unconscious man. She unfastened his collar, coat, and shirt and laid her hand upon his heart. It was beating, steadily and slowly. She wrenched back the coat farther to discover where he was hurt. A flesh wound under the shoulder showed where the knife had got home. To Jackie, unused to such a sight, it looked dreadful.

While thus engaged her thoughts were racing. First of all she must give the alarm, get him attended to, and before awkward questions were asked or a hue and cry raised she must get away with Benny — right away, at once, back to London. But how? It would take days to walk there, and Benny was not capable of so much exertion. Of money she had n't a penny.

The chink of coins in Bowman's pocket as she moved him put an idea into her mind that made her flush with shame. But the idea persisted. Determined to carry it out, she swallowed her pride. What she would not have stooped to do for her own sake she was ready to perform for Benny's.

Registering a vow that if needs be she would beg in

the streets until she had accumulated sufficient to return what she must now steal, she put her hand in Bowman's pocket and took from it all she found there, five shillings and some coppers. It was not enough for her purpose. Desperate now, she began searching for the letter-case, out of which she had seen him take notes to pay their fare down to Cradeley. She found it. There were ten pounds in it. She took three, and was putting back the case when Bowman quite suddenly opened his eyes. The malignant expression in them showed that he must have returned to consciousness some minutes back, for he exhibited no sudden surprise at what she was doing. The look he gave her was simply one of intense venom.

"So that's what you're up to, you little cat," he said thickly. "Going through my pockets! Thought I was dead, eh?"

He dragged himself into a sitting posture.

Relief at finding he was able to speak and to be vengeful made Jackie forget the shame she felt at being discovered in the act of picking his pocket.

"You revive! You live!" she cried. "Wait, I fetch you water."

She flew to the jug on her washstand, but when she offered him the water to drink, he waved it away, consigning it to the place where assuredly one day, if men have their deserts, he would crave for a cup of it in vain.

"What have you taken out of my pocket?" he demanded furiously. "Tell the truth, you blessed Apache."

"Three pound five shilling," answered Jackie, pale but composed. "For a loan I take it, that is all. I am not a thief."

Bowman swore. Half the night he had lain in a drunken stupor. His wound was superficial. He did not feel any

different from what he usually felt after a night of heavy drinking. His head ached and his temper was ugly. The dull pain in his shoulder hardly troubled him.

"Put that money back," he commanded.

"I wished to buy a new dress with it, that is all," Jackie said with a plausibility that deceived him.

"Oh, well, then, you can keep it. I'll dock it out of your screw. You and I have got other accounts to settle. A great deal more than three pounds five, I can tell you, my pretty dear."

"Settle with me later," she agreed. "Now you are hurt, I must call for help."

"You can call for help when I tell you to," he glowered. "Devil of a hurry you're in, all of a sudden, considering you left me lying here all night!"

"I? No, I did not know. Only just now when I —"

"Pretended to be surprised, eh? Oh, yes, I know all about that." He nodded cunningly. "You wait!" He leant on the step, and the leer he gave her was one of mingled menace and thwarted desire. "I've something to say to you first — while my breath lasts. . . . Yesterday, coming down in the train you said you'd hate me for ever. I did n't mind your kid's tantrums. But last night" — his voice shook — "when you turned up in a fury in your stage rig, I saw all of a sudden you were n't a kid at all. Oh, yes, there was plenty of the woman about you. Easy to see, it was. You fetched me, right enough."

"Fetched?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. I got struck on you."

The uncertainty in her face incensed him.

"Fell in love with you, if you prefer it put that way," he snapped.

The declaration exasperated her. She showed it by a scornful laugh.

"In love? Oh, but that is droll!"

"You won't think it so droll when I've finished. I tell you I was mad for you. Last night, if you'd asked me for the moon I'd have got it for you if I could. I was like that — soft!"

Bowman soft! It amazed her to hear him use the word. Last night he had been sippy, not soft. The drink had done it. She knew. She had seen the same effect before in others. Madame Lemine was like that. When she had had two or three glasses of cognac she would weep and call Jackie her *petite ange*. But next day there was always a beating.

"Whether you love me or hate me, it matters not," she declared. "I don't care. But I do care that you recover. How much are you hurt?"

He frowned at her, not sure whether her indifference was real or assumed.

"Hurt? Is that all you call it? Attempted murder's the right word. Not that *you* want telling. You'll be asking me next, who did it? D' you think I don't know? I know as well as you do!"

Jackie shut her lips tight. She was not going to be trapped into giving Benny away. She did not appreciate that Bowman, far from suspecting Benny, was actually accusing herself.

Last night, as he had admitted, the unexpected display of Jackie's shapeliness had, like the drink he had taken, gone to his head. He had sat up long after the inn had closed for the night and, all his passions inflamed, stumbled out into the darkness and made his way unsteadily to the summer-house. He would n't startle her. No, he would just go and see if she was asleep, and if not, well — kisses were sweet, and Jackie — he kept seeing her in the low-necked spangled dress — was a "spicy morsel."

. . . She would struggle a bit, of course, when he took her in his arms, for that was her way. But in the end she would knuckle under like Winter's daughter and the other objects of his short-lived amours. There was fire and spirit in Jackie. She would fan the flame of love. She could n't help it. . . . She was n't the sort a man would get tired of quickly either. He could imagine being sweet on her for quite a long time. Yes, "fair soft" he felt about her.

And all the while she had been fooling him! That was his belief now. He believed she had not gone to bed at all. She had probably been sitting out there in the darkness with the knife ready in her hand, waiting for him, like the little tiger-cat she was, guessing he would come, because she must have seen how she had "fetched" him. His recollection was that last night she had put the knife away after he offered it to her. In that case she must have got hold of it again later on. Anyway, when just now he opened his eyes, there she was, hiding it in her stocking. All his overnight "softness" was superseded by another emotion, the acid vindictiveness of a trapped beast against the shackles that hold it. He was of the unforgiving type that deems itself injured by a woman's resistance, even when she acts in self-defence — the type that can foment within itself the sour enmity which has its roots in the soil of sex-antagonism. His whole being was saturated with the venom of it.

"Yes," he spat out, "I know who knifed me as well as you do. But I'm going to keep it to myself. I'm going to save it up. It don't suit me to take my revenge in a police-court. Not yet awhile, anyway. I've my own ideas of getting my own back. I can afford to wait."

Jackie did not understand the threat. She thought he might be delirious. For that reason she was not afraid

when he managed to raise himself and clutch at her arm. She was able to shake him off without much difficulty.

"If I do not go for help you may die," she said.

"Don't you calculate so much on my dying," he raved. "I'm not near it, my girl. You can bet on that. I'm going to live and hold you just here." He hollowed a shaking hand. "Going to teach you to eat out of it; going to tame you. You may snap and you may scratch, but in the end you'll come to heel at the crack of my whip, because you'll know what it means if you don't. And I'm going to love you when I like and hate you all the time. . . . I'm going to see fear look out of your eyes before I've done with you. Don't you imagine the hate's all on your side. You're going to pay me for what you've done, and wish yourself dead for having done it!"

Jackie made no rejoinder. She merely brought a pillow from her bed, placed it under his head, and ran indoors for assistance.

VI

BENNY woke with a start and sat up in bed. All his sleepy faculties were centred on something — something gruesome. He seemed to have been dreaming it all night. It affected him like a challenge. He shared the room with Bowman, but Bowman's bed was empty. To all appearance it had not been slept in. Influenced by his dream, disquieted by it and the sight of the empty bed, which confirmed his nocturnal fears, he rapped impetuously against the wall as a summons to Winter in the next room.

Almost immediately Winter came in. Benny looked at him in surprise.

"Why, you're dressed!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Made a mistake in the time. Thought it was half-past seven instead of barely six. Are you going to get up? I'll give you a hand with your clothes. Where's the gov'nor?"

"I don't know. I can't think." By this time Benny was more bewildered than sleepy. "I don't remember him coming to bed. Perhaps he stayed downstairs and went to sleep in a chair."

"Very likely," Winter agreed indifferently.

He helped Benny out of bed. When the boy's feet touched the floor a twinge of pain racked him. It was nothing unusual. His day always began and ended with pain, but in the morning he was always more sensitive to it than at other times. As a consequence, dressing was invariably a long proceeding. Bowman, when there, was apt to render him assistance in a way that was more drastic than pleasant, but Winter had almost a woman's deftness. But for his kindly help both in private and pub-

lic Benny would often have collapsed. His sense of gratitude to Winter went deep.

"Feel bad?" asked Winter sympathetically.

"Not much more than usual," said Benny, though he was grey about the lips because of his throbbing back. He sat down on a chair to rest. "Pain takes the pluck out of you when it never stops," he added apologetically.

"There's not much want of pluck about you, sonny."

"There is — in everything to do with the boss. It's only when he's out of sight I feel equal to standing up to him; but when he comes near me I'm like a dog who expects a thrashing and only wants to slink into a corner."

His face and his attitude were full of dejection. Presently he got up slowly and with Winter's help finished dressing. His eyes kept going to the empty bed.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Winter.

"I want to tell you something," Benny said suddenly. "It's bothering me. It's a dream about — Jackie."

"Go on," said Winter.

"Last night I was thinking of her when I went to bed and till I fell asleep. You saw the look that brute gave her when she came into the parlour in a paddy because her dress did n't fit?"

Winter nodded.

"And you know what he was thinking?"

Again Winter nodded.

"It made me afraid for her."

"So it did me."

"And I went to sleep with it on my mind," Benny stopped, as though he did not quite know how to express himself. "I did n't tell you how we came to be friends so quickly. I will now, because in a way it helps to explain my dream. You know Bowman got her at an agency in London yesterday afternoon. She told me all about it.

She did n't want to come. She wanted to run off. He left her downstairs with me and told me to keep an eye on her while he went to the theatre. I did n't take much notice of her at first. I did n't particularly care what the new kid was like, except that I felt sorry for any girl who had to stand for that stock-whip act. Well, she had tea and then she tried to do a bolt. I told her what the boss would most likely do to me if he got back and found she'd quitted. She came back then to where I was on the sofa and sat right down on a stool by my side and took my hand and looked at me with those great eyes of hers. They were brimming over. Tears — for me! Because she was sorry for me! From that minute on I'd have done anything for her. Just to know she was sorry because I was a cripple made crookedness and pain seem worth while. All the time she kept on looking at me and putting my hand to her face in a baby-way she's got, and I felt as though the sun had come out and was warming me through and through — warming all the pain out of my back and the bitterness out of my heart. All of a sudden I seemed to understand why birds sing and children play and people are happy. Before that anything to do with happiness only seemed a sort of fairy story. *She* altered it all. It's mighty strange."

"Not so strange as you think," Winter said thoughtfully.

"We were promising to be friends when Bowman came back. He laughed at us, the sneering brute! It made me afraid he'd begin making Jackie's life a misery to her. You saw how pleased he was with her at rehearsal. I heard him tell her he'd give her a box of chocolates. While he kept thinking of her just as a kiddy she was safe enough; but last night when she came in in that spangled dress, when we saw — and he saw — that she was n't a kid at all, but a — a girl growing up" — a flush stained Benny's

face — “there was n’t any mistaking what was in his mind. I knew what he meant by the way he looked at her. It made me hate him worse than I did when the doctor told me I’d never be more than a cripple for the rest of my life! I understood then something of what the men over in France must have felt when they had to stand by and see the filthy Germans kissing and insulting their sisters and wives. Bowman was kissing and insulting Jackie with that look of his.”

Winter turned his face away.

“I saw,” he said dolefully. “He used to look at my Milly like that. Thinking his beastly thoughts! Go on, Benny.”

“Last night I was dead tired. I meant to keep awake till he came up to bed, so that if he was more drunk than usual, or started to prowl around, I should be able to call you. But now I don’t know whether I went to sleep or not. I don’t know whether I was awake or dreaming. I believe — I hope I *was* asleep because I dreamt” — he paused a moment, and then lowered his voice to a whisper — “dreamt I *killed him!*”

Winter, sitting on the bed, gave a start. Through dry lips he silently repeated the last two words. His fingers twitched nervously. Then he said: “You were dreaming, right enough. People often do things in dreams that they would n’t do awake. Try and forget it.”

“But I can’t! It was all so real and it kept on for so long. All night it seemed. I could n’t wake up and yet somehow I felt awake. You know the way dreams have. This one was ghastly! My back was n’t hurting at all. All of a sudden I was strong. I was waiting up for Bowman. He did n’t come. Then I went down to the parlour and fetched that knife. It was on the mantelpiece where Jackie put it. I took it and waited on the landing. You

can see out into the garden from there. I seemed to wait for hours. Next, I saw Bowman come out into the garden. He stumbled all over the place like a blind man. He *was* blind — blind drunk. You know what he's like then. When I saw where he was making for — the summer-house — I went blind, too — blind with rage! I don't know how I got downstairs, but — in the dream — if it was a dream — I followed and caught him up. He was standing by the summer-house door, calling Jackie, talking sweet under his breath and swearing. It sounded as if he did n't know the difference between curses and kisses. . . .”

“Could you see out there — in your dream?” Winter asked.

“Yes, it was moonlight. I saw him put his hand out to push the door open. I could n't stand that. I could n't wait any longer. And I was n't afraid. Somehow I seemed to have the strength of a horse. I had the knife in my hand and I drove it into him. He did n't cry out. He just dropped where he stood. . . . And then the moon seemed to go out and I felt myself falling and falling — a horrible way down — until suddenly I woke up here in bed!”

Beads of perspiration stood on Benny's forehead. The telling of the nightmare story almost left him breathless. Its effect on Winter was hardly less distressing, but he concealed it.

“Forget it. Don't talk about it,” he said again, uneasily.

“I wish I could. Even now I'm awake it does n't seem like a dream. It's too real. It might have happened.”

He got up and limped to the door.

“Where are you going?” asked Winter.

“Down to the parlour to get that knife. Then I shall

really know it was a dream. Until I do I shan't be comfortable."

Winter did not dissuade him. He followed him out of the room and helped him downstairs.

"I may have had the strength of a horse in my dream," the boy muttered on the way down, "but I'm weaker than half a rat this morning."

In the parlour he went straight to the mantelpiece. The only things on it were a cheap clock and a pair of brass candlesticks. He turned a scared face on Winter. "My God! It isn't here! . . . Winter, you don't think . . . ?

Winter drew him away.

"No, I don't," he said sharply. "Take a pull at yourself. What's got you?"

"I wonder!" Benny's eyes were fixed. "Men walk in their sleep. A man might do murder in his sleep. Look at your own face in the glass. You *do* think something. You know you do!"

"I don't think anything of the sort," was Winter's reply. He tried to speak stoutly, but his voice shook. "Bowman will turn up directly in a deuce of a temper, ringing all the bells in the place for breakfast before it's ready, same as usual. It's early yet." He looked at his watch. "It's only half-past six."

The parlour had two windows. One of them looked directly on the summer-house; the other gave a view of the garden door, by which Bowman might be expected to enter. Benny went slowly to the latter and stared out of it with an unconvinced look on his face.

"If I got up and took that knife in my sleep," he propounded to himself, "what did I do with it?"

"You did n't take it," Winter insisted. "It — it'll turn up, same as the gov'nor."

They stood together looking out on the dew-drenched

garden, all a-sparkle in the morning sunlight. In the house everything was quiet; nobody was up yet. Outside, except for the birds, there was equal stillness. The universal calmness reacted on Benny. His doubts and fears began to lessen. As he was about to turn from the window his ears caught a sound. Then he saw something that made him clutch spasmodically at Winter's arm.

Along the path that led from the garden to the door came Jackie, preceding two men carrying an improvised stretcher with the man they both dreaded and hated prostrate upon it.

Winter almost used roughness in pulling Benny away from the window. He pushed him into a chair, and with a strength that was surprising in one of such poor physique, held him there.

"I'm going to see what's happened," he said. "You must n't come. You're to stay here. Promise me you won't stir. If — if the gov'nor's had an accident you'd be no use."

"What sort of an accident do you —"

"How should I know?" was the harsh interruption. "You're not to come out."

Benny shivered.

"But — if he's badly hurt!" he faltered. "If I did it in my sleep —"

"Who'd believe you did it in your sleep?" Winter lowered his voice, speaking quickly. "For God's sake — for all our sakes — keep quiet about your dream. It's — it's only a coincidence. Why, I've dreamt I — of things happening to him — over and over again. He'd have been dead long before now if —"

He broke off, listening to the men mounting the stairs with their burden. Benny heard them, too, and his breath came quick.

"Then you *do* think —" he quavered.

"No, I don't, I tell you! Give me your word you'll stay here till I come back."

"Oh, I'll stay. I'm dreaming still, I suppose. Why can't I wake up?"

Winter went out quickly, closing the door after him. Benny had no idea how long he waited there. As in his dream, time seemed to be abrogated. Hours might be minutes and minutes eternities.

A touch on his shoulder roused him. Jackie stood beside him. Her compassionate heart went out to him when she saw the agonized expression in the face he turned upon her. If before this she had been in any doubt as to his guilt, that look would have dispelled it.

"Jackie!" he cried, "what have I done? What have I done? I think I'm going mad. Where did you find him?"

"Upon the step."

"And the knife?"

"I found that also. I 'ave taken it to 'ide it."

"Then you think I did it in my dream?"

"I do not understand what you mean about a dream. But now there is no time to talk. I have money. It is necessary that we go at once. We must not waste a moment. You must throw yourself on Jackie."

"You mean — run away?" he asked breathlessly.

"There is nothing else. In London we will 'ide. Oh, Benny, do not stop to ask me questions."

"But if he dies, Jackie —"

"He will not die. In the fewest of days he will be well again, and then, as you know, he will be seven times a devil. I think he would kill you. There is a train to London in a quarter of an hour. I have looked. If you wait we shall miss it! Would you not trust me?"

Trust her! Benny swallowed back a sob.

"Oh, Jackie," he said brokenly, "you've got a star to follow. You've said so. You want to be famous, to make a career. You're bound to, anyhow, but you don't want to saddle yourself from the very start with a cripple, just because you promised to be his friend. I give back your promise. *You go.* I'll stay and face it out."

But Jackie, determined on the course she meant to tread, however far it might diverge from the orbit of her star of destiny, was not to be turned from it. In her resolve to link her virile young life with Benny's broken one she glimpsed something of the exquisite mystery of sacrifice — the quasi-divine spirit which moves the innocent to suffer for the guilty, the young to succour the old, and the strong to care for the weak.

She did not answer him in words. Instead she gave him a soft look that sent a wonderful glow through his heart. For that look alone he would have followed her to the ends of the earth, though he had to limp on a crutch all the way.

Jackie held out her hand and helped him to his feet. Already she was shaking off her obsession about Bowman and his hurts. She had heard the doctor who had been summoned say that he would be well in a few days. She heard London calling, the London in which she had already known hunger and cold, blows and hardships, the London her alien heart already loved, because one day, when she had conquered it, she firmly believed it would take her to its own. . . .

VII

LADY MARLBURY, formerly Virginia Carter, set down her coffee-cup on the luncheon table, and rose.

"Come into my room, Mervyn," she said. "I asked you to-day because I knew I'd be alone and I wanted to have a talk."

Carter got up and followed his stately sister through the celebrated pink marble hall of Portlington House. It bristled with arms and armour, was hung with tapestries of wonderful rarity and portraits that were historical. Portlington House and the air of state pertaining to it rather got on Carter's nerves. He loved beautiful surroundings, the beautiful in words, paint, art, music, or women. He could appreciate the treasures of Portlington House better than a good many people, but the life of almost regal splendour in which his sister lived did not appeal to his retiring tastes.

To Virginia herself the house and all that it contained epitomized everything that she had aspired to and attained in life — complete and exclusive social success. On the marriage which made her the second wife of the Earl of Marlbury she had reached the summit of her ambition. With the adaptability of a clever woman she had shed any republican tendencies she might once have held, and definitely established a position for herself as one of the most distinguished young women in society. She was an excellent hostess (who never forgot that she had entertained Royalty), a conscientious stepmother (Marlbury had a grown-up daughter), and above all, although she was not yet thirty, she was a woman of the world.

Looking across at her now, uniquely and splendidly gowned and wearing a long rope of the famous Marlbury pearls, Mervyn felt a touch of wistful compassion for his sister. In his opinion she had missed so much of the things that count — so very much more than she had gained.

For herself, she had settled down to a life that she well adorned, and was content. As a girl, when she inherited the fortune left her by a millionaire father, she had deliberately chosen a state of magnificence and social ascendancy.

"I'm going over to England to marry into the aristocracy," she had said to her brother. "I shall be chaperoned by a society lady and I'm going to have a great position. It's the only thing worth while. I've dreamt of it ever since I was little. It's got to come true."

"And what'll Sam do?" Carter had reminded her. Sam was a sweetheart who had grown up with her, a youth with his way to make.

"Sam has n't any social ambitions," she had answered. "He'd never shine. He's a clod."

Nevertheless, in her way, as Carter well knew, she had loved the clod, only she cared for position more. He wondered sometimes if she ever harked back to the old simple days when their father's fortune was yet in the making, when place and power had not turned her head or her heart. He knew her marriage with Marlbury could not possibly have been a love-match. They were hardly ever together in private life, though they lived in the same house and appeared together with commendable frequency in the houses of other people. Moreover, Virginia was childless. Like most childless women she was inclined to be hard.

"You're awfully quiet, Mervyn," she said, taking a

chair opposite him. "What has happened to you lately? I've been worrying about you."

"There's no need," said he lightly.

"But you have n't been near us."

"I've been busy."

"Looking for fiddles?" She frowned a little. "I wish you'd take an interest in live things, Mervyn."

"Why, so I do," he said with a smile. "Folks interest me tremendously. Real ones, that is. The ones with character."

"Oh, you mean artistic people who don't cut their hair or wash. They don't count. They're just a fancy, like fiddles."

"I believe you'd wash a Strad and powder its strings, Virginia!"

"Do be serious! When you're married, you'll have to give up your bohemian friends and ways for Irene's sake. It's on her account I asked you here for a talk to-day. I sent her out on purpose. How soon can you marry her?"

Carter sat up in his chair. Up till now he had been entirely ignorant of Virginia's plans for her stepdaughter.

"Marry her?" he echoed, completely taken aback. "My dear Virgie, whatever made you think of such a thing?"

"Because it's my duty to find her a wealthy and suitable husband. What are you looking so astonished about? It would be an admirable alliance for you both."

"But — but what does Irene say? Have you the faintest reason for supposing she loves me?"

"Girls in our position of life don't think about love before marriage," asserted Virginia. "It comes after. Wealth and position are the two essentials to married happiness."

"Are they? Is that your experience? I've never asked you until now. Are *you* happy, Virgie?"

"I never look back," she answered shortly. "But it's not my affairs we're discussing now, Mervyn. It's Irene's and yours. She'll marry you . . . if you ask her."

Carter lit a cigarette.

"But I have n't the faintest intention of asking her, my good Virginia," he said slowly. "You've surprised me altogether. I never guessed you had such a notion. A while back I was going to tell you something — to confide in you. I wonder if you'll understand. . . . At any rate, it may make it plain to you why I can't fall in with your plans."

A little frown gathered between Lady Marlbury's brows. Although she scented an indiscretion, she expressed readiness to listen. Her cold and anxious gaze rather disconcerted Carter. He made pretence of the sun being in his eyes and turned his chair with its back to the windows.

"I told you I'd been busy," he began. "This time I've not been searching for a fiddle. I've been looking for — a girl."

The frown on Virginia's brows threatened to become concrete.

"A little girl," he pursued dreamily. "You need n't get the notion of a designing hussy who has her eye on my money. This child is n't grown-up yet, Virgie. Don't touch my dream with dross. I was in Soho last week on the trail of an Amati and I caught sight of her dancing to a barrel-organ. She was childhood and spring incarnate, and she danced like a fairy. She was poetry in motion. When the music stopped and the crowd she'd collected moved off, I spoke to her. She was French. She said she was being trained by an old woman, and the

place she lived in, a theatrical costumier's, was just behind where we stood.

"I don't suppose we exchanged half a dozen sentences, but all the while she was casting a spell over me — a fairy spell. She was as bewitching as a sprite, and yet she was human and lonely too, I gathered. I promised to befriend her, but I was fool enough to let her out of my sight. Some one called her from inside the shop and she ran indoors, after promising she would slip out again that afternoon; but when I went back she was n't there. I went inside. The woman who kept the shop was suspicious of me. She said there was no girl such as I described in the place. I've been there again and again, but I've never seen Jackie — that's the name she gave me — any more. That's all. But it's simply made the whole difference in the world to me. It's the reason why I can't marry Irene, or any other 'suitable' girl. A fairy has put her fingers on my heart and bewitched me."

He looked up and smiled at her whimsically, but there was a lingering sadness behind the smile.

"Have we grown too far apart for you to understand?" he asked. "Don't tear my dream to tatters, Virgie."

Virginia did not speak for a minute. When she did her voice was cold, cold as the life she had elected to live.

"I'm glad to hear you call it a dream," she answered slowly. "The whole thing's absurd. You'll never see the girl again. At least, I hope not. Besides, my dear Mervyn . . . a street-dancer! So very sordid!"

"Sordid? Ah, you would call it that! Poor Virgie! Can't you still see the colours in a rainbow? I'm older than you and yet I'm glad to say I'm still sentimental, romantic, anything you like to call it. Why, every barrel-organ I hear playing in the street, even the one that has just struck up outside, brings me a vision of my little

dancing girl, and sends me to the window with the hope that, by a freak of coincidence, I may run across her again. Only things don't often happen so easily."

He crossed to the window as he spoke to look out on the street, and then stood arrested, hardly able to believe his amazed eyes. For there, on the opposite side of the road, in the full sunlight, no dream, but a very reality, was Jackie — dancing!

VIII

It was past five o'clock. Benny moved away from the window. He had been watching for Jackie. He went over to the gas-ring, took the kettle off it, and made the tea. Then he placed a chair at the table in readiness for her and went back to his vigil at the window. Jackie's professional work came to an end at five o'clock. To-day she was late.

Presently he heard her light step on the stairs. She was running up faster than was her wont. She burst into the room, dropped the armful of parcels she was carrying, and flung her arms round his neck. Her eyes were dancing, her cheeks rosy. She was in some seventh heaven of delight.

"Ecoute, Benny — guess!" she cried. "Oh, you will not believe! I not know 'ow to say it! Oh, I must dance again! My feet will not keep still! My 'eart sings!"

She whirled round the room in sheer excess of high spirits and then flopped breathless into a chair.

Benny, unable to account for her excitement, could only look on and wait for an explanation of it. Her mercurial temperament was always puzzling him. She was the Cynthia of the moment, as changeable as the mercury in a barometer, for ever registering a bewildering variety of moods. She would become exuberant over a sunset, the colour of a flower, or the invention of a new dance step. A child crying in the street because its mother had slapped it would drive her to fury or to tears. It was impossible to keep pace with her variable humors. Every day she showed some new aspect. She was like sunlight, flickering

here, there, everywhere, and she was the whole radiance of Benny's life.

"Do tell me, Jackie," he entreated. "But have some tea first. I'll swear you've had no dinner."

Jackie drew a line under her chin.

"Je suis jusqu'à là with joy! Benny, I 'ave see 'im — my m'sieur! I 'ave spoke with 'im. Felicitate me!"

"Is that all?" he asked rather sourly.

"All? It is everyt'ing! It is the answer to the prayer I make every night. It is the 'and of God that picks me up and sets me in his path. I think to lose my friend. C'est vraiment belle fortune que je l'attrappe! C'est de merveilleux! Oh, I cannot speak English!"

"You seem great on making friends." There was a jealous note in Benny's voice.

"I 'ope so. Life would be triste without," she said; but she added with quick and gentle understanding: "It does not signify I shall ever love you less, my Benny, so remove that black look from your face. My m'sieur is an angel. You will judge for yourself. He will be your big brother and your father."

Benny commenced to pour out the tea, a minor service, one of the many domestic duties which he took upon himself. He could do so little otherwise. Jackie was not good at dispensing tea. In the present state of their finances she made it extravagantly strong and was over-prodigious with the sugar and the milk.

"I don't want any brothers," he said, setting her cup by her plate. "I've got a little sister. That's enough for me."

Though her feet were now still, Jackie's eyes still danced.

"You must not be greedy of your little sister," she teased.

"Brothers look after their sisters. That's what they're for," he returned sententiously.

She made a comic face.

"But from what would you protect me? There is no bad person to be afraid of now that we 'ave escape from the 'orrid Bowman. Oh, but I am forgetting! We have a feast to-day. I have made purchases. That is why I was late."

She got up from the table and undid her parcels, producing a cake, a pot of jam, and two peaches. There were sundry other packages which she did not unwrap just then.

Benny stared at the peaches and then back at her in wonderment.

"Has Sassoni paid you?" he asked.

"No, he pay on Saturday. This is a surprise — a wind-blow —"

"Windfall, you mean. Did you find money in the street as well as your monsieur?"

"I will tell you." Jackie helped herself lavishly to jam and pushed the pot across the table, where it remained untouched. "To-day I dance in Belgravia —"

"Where's that?"

"Sassoni call it so. He like the sound of the name he say, because it has Italian resemblance. It is a part where the streets are wide and more quiet, and the houses are big. Sassoni say it is a 'swell' quarter, where the rich live. We will live there ourselves one day, perhaps, and I will have pink geraniums and marguerites in all the boxes of the windows. Also a green door with a knocker of brass fashioned like a face. But I go too fast. Alors, in Belgravia, Sassoni play and I dance. He was greatly pleased, for often there was silver instead of copper in his cap. He say that now I dance for him I am more profitable than

his monkey which has mange. So I am pleased that he is pleased, and I dance with still more abandon. Presently we stop before a great house. Sassoni say a nobleman live there." In her excitement she spoke at a great rate. "And — j'étais frappée d'étonnement — while I dance, tenez, out of that great house, making haste down the steps, 'e come to me, 'olding out 'is 'and — my m'sieur that I 'ave lost!" Want of breath stopped her.

"What did you do?"

"Sassoni stop playing and I stop dancing, and m'sieur and I stand there so overjoyed! But we could not make a long conversation because, as I tell 'im, I am engage to dance until five o'clock. Then he write down an address for me and tell me to go there to see 'im this very evening at seven!" Her eyes fell on Benny's empty plate. "Oh, Benny! You eat nothing! This jam is of a quality! And you do not touch it!"

"I asked you just now how you got the money to buy it," he said, restraining the little hand that would have helped him so liberally.

"My m'sieur put a billet de banque in Sassoni's cap. Sassoni is so enchanted that he give me one whole pound for myself and some silver. Oh! I nearly dance with joy to know it would buy us a feast! I have not like that you go without so many things for me."

"Go without?" echoed Benny. Never once had thoughts of privation been in his mind.

"But yes. Since we come to live 'ere there has been no meat to give you. For myself, I can live on a little salad and much bread. But it is not good food for one like yourself. I have thought that you are paler. En effet, one morning I look into the shop of a butcher and it was in my mind to offer to dance for him for a small portion of meat. Only, he tell me to go away. But now there is meat in

plenty. I will myself make a fricassée with vegetables tomorrow. Benny, why do you look so sorrowful? Have you wait too long to 'ave hunger? This peach is delicious. Shut your eyes, eat it, and figure to yourself that we are already installed in a fine hotel — in Belgravia!"

"I don't want it," he demurred.

But her chagrin was so acute that to please her he ate the peach and some cake as well. He enjoyed neither. It hurt him to know that she had accepted money to buy him dainties — money that came out of the pocket of the stranger whom she showed such pleasure in meeting again. He was filled with misgiving, not jealousy. He loved Jackie with far too slavish a love to be jealous of her. To her he owed the only happiness he had known in the whole course of his life. He adored her with something of the passion of a stray dog whom a compassionate human being has befriended. True that since they had been together he had sometimes gone short of food, but that was not her fault. She as well had gone short for that matter, and she had a healthier appetite than he. Short commons did not trouble him in the very least. She had opened a new world to him, an Elysium in which, almost, he was able to support himself on happiness alone.

Jackie, moreover, had laid her small healing hands upon his troubled conscience. At the outset he had confessed to the deed of which he believed he had been guilty in his sleep. In her eyes the fact that when he committed it he had not been conscious exculpated him entirely. Every night, to make doubly sure, she prayed to the Virgin on her knees to accord him pardon by healing his persecutor quickly; and when they read in a borrowed copy of the "Era" that the company were still on the road, his sense of guilt lightened, for in that case Bowman could not be dead or seriously injured.

But now another care oppressed him, destroying his newly found happiness. Jackie's rediscovery of the man whom she called her "m'sieur" filled him with anxiety. Benny's views were of a primitive order, based on life in the lower plane of the theatrical world. He fervently desired to keep Jackie ignorant of that seamy side.

He remained silent while she chattered on, wondering what he could do to protect her, make her a little more worldly-wise, without destroying her extraordinary innocence.

While they washed up the tea-things together these thoughts still troubled him. Jackie's spirits were so high that she remained unaffected by his moodiness.

"But what shall I wear for my rendez-vous?" she exclaimed. "I would like to be *comme-il-faut* to please m'sieur, but hélas, I 'ave nothing but my coloured scarf! Still I do not think m'sieur would take great notice of what one would wear. He keeps his eyes upon one's face. Oh, Benny, they are eyes that twinkle. And of a blueness!"

Benny wiped the last cup dry. Then he turned impulsively to her.

"Don't go to-night, Jackie."

She faced him, surprised.

"But, Benny, I 'ave promise! Is it that you do not like m'sieur whom you do not even know? That is foolish."

Benny made a gigantic effort to be articulate.

"It's nothing to do with liking or not liking him," he protested. "When you get older, Jackie dear, you'll understand that people, girls especially, ought to be careful of . . . Oh, it's so difficult to explain!"

"Careful?" Jackie's shrug was immense. "But I do not care. Why should I? Also, I am Jackie. I shall do as I like. Now and always."

"I only want to put you wise," he floundered. "If

you had a mother or a sister there would n't be any need. . . . Old Bowman is n't the only man in the world who's bad. There are lots of others. This friend of yours —"

The brown eyes flashed.

"If you speak against my m'sieur I shall become annoyed."

"I was n't going to speak against him. What I want to make you understand is that a man may look nice and seem nice, and yet never be half good enough for you, Jackie."

Jackie smiled indulgently.

"Oh, but, Benny, it is the shoe on the other foot," she cried. "It is Jackie who is not good enough for her m'sieur. I am but a street dancer. The butcher when he tell me to go away call me a 'baggage.' My m'sieur is a great gentleman." She patted his arm. "Rest tranquil."

"But I can't rest at all while you're gone," he fretted. "It's bad enough to sit up here all day, only able to crawl as far as the end of the street, and to keep thinking that you're dancing the shoes off your feet to keep me; but it's worse when I think of the — the other things — the dangers — I can't keep you out of."

"Poor Benny! But do not fear. My m'sieur will protect me. And also do not forget" — she crossed herself — "there is God and the Holy Virgin. Now, let us be gay. I will show you what I buy."

She darted over to her parcels again, and like a pleased child unwrapped them one by one. With the exception of the two peaches she had expended her money with true French economy. It was astonishing how much she had contrived to get for a few shillings. Last of all she produced a bunch of flowers, a small coloured statue of a saint, two wax candles, and a cheap pair of miniature sconces to hold them.

With these she repaired to the adjoining cubbyhole where she slept, and after a minute or two called him in. On a wooden box draped in a torn piece of muslin curtain she had improvised a small shrine. A statue of the Virgin and Child — a previous possession — occupied its centre. The flowers in a soapdish and a shallow bowl flanked it. The wax candles stood alight before the new saint.

“I promised to St. Anthony the candles if he would find my m’sieur,” she said piously. “The saints are very good. They do not forget. The candles will burn till I come back.”

She shook out the coloured scarf which she wore in place of a hat, retied it over her curls, and with a sisterly kiss on Benny’s cheek ran off light-heartedly to keep her appointment.

Benny stood looking at the little shrine and the candles burning to St. Anthony. With a little hesitation he also touched his breast as he had often seen Jackie do. The serenity of the Virgin and the benign look on the saint’s face animated him with a sudden reverence. On unaccustomed knees he knelt painfully to pray — for Jackie.

IX

CARTER waited in his rooms in a fidget. He was horribly afraid that Jackie might escape him again, and long before the time appointed for her arrival he was in a turmoil lest something should prevent her coming. In this early stage of their acquaintance he did not attempt to analyze his feelings towards her. Indeed, they were of so fine an essence that he would have found it difficult to do so. A fastidious taste had kept him peculiarly immune from everyday affairs of the heart. The girls he had met from time to time, febrile dancing butterflies, products for the most part of the past war, aroused in him but little desire to know them better. Femininity in his eyes at this epoch was in a temperamental but not always beautiful state of transition. Femininity, like the world itself, seemed off its balance. His ideal of what a woman should be was based on the character of his mother, long since dead. In his estimation there had never been any one to compare with her.

Jackie, stranger though she was, stirred hidden springs within him that no one else had ever touched; but his regard for her was tempered by the sympathetic forbearance that one accords to a child. Primarily she appealed to his imagination, to all that was artistic in him. The small, pale, oval face, the mobile lips, the glorious, speaking eyes, made up a living picture that would always dominate his memory. One had only to look into Jackie's eyes to believe in the quality of genius. And genius is not for one man, but for all men. Carter intuitively realized that in whatever way his feelings

towards her might develop, it would be an artistic sin to suppress or put a shackle on her talents.

A ring at the bell sent him hurrying to open the front door before his servant could reach it. He held it wide for Jackie to enter. It was an epoch in his life when she crossed his threshold.

He was glad to see that she had not spoilt her picturesque appearance by a change of dress. He did not know that she had no other dress to change into. The organ-grinder's wife had remade the ugly frock in which she had come away from Soho, turning it into a full short skirt suitable for dancing, and in addition had provided her with a black velvet bodice and a muslin blouse such as Italian girls wear. Dressed so and with the bright scarf for headdress, Carter found her enchanting.

The beautiful room into which he took her, so different from anything she had as yet seen, did not embarrass her. There was no room for *malaise* in one who had an innate love and appreciation of beauty. She was affected by people more than things. Just now her chief thought was that she could at last explain that she had not broken her word on the day when she had failed to meet him.

In English a little more broken than usual, because she was so excited, she told him of Bowman and of how she had been taken away against her will to fulfil her first engagement on tour. She described Bowman with vindictive vehemence. The only thing she did not touch on was her finding of him, unconscious, outside her door. That involved Benny, and accordingly had to be scrupulously suppressed. It was a matter between her and the Recording Angel.

"Et puis," she concluded, "the day after I go to that place we make the opportunity to run away, Benny and I. Since then we are in London. And every night, m'sieur,

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je vous assure, I 'ave look at my star and pray to St. Anthony to discover you for me, so I should explain 'ow it 'appen that I was not outside at two o'clock that afternoon. Oh, il m'a affligé that you must suppose I was tell you lies."

"I should never think that," said Carter. "But it troubled me also that I could not discover you."

Disdaining the reposeful invitation of deep, cushioned chairs, Jackie perched on the arm of a sofa. She regarded Carter with a smile of purest joy and satisfaction.

"It is so good to be here with you!" she exclaimed; and then suddenly asked: "Comment dois-je addresser m'sieur?"

"Je m'appelle Carter — Mervyn Carter," said he.

"Merrveen! Quel joli nom!"

"You like it? Then call me by it instead of m'sieur."

"Je veut bien," she declared, greatly gratified. "But I must not remain too long because Benny is alone all day. I 'ave tell him you are my friend, but he do not believe because he has not see you. Is it — convenable — that m'sieur —"

"Mervyn," he corrected.

"Pardon. That you would have the goodness to return with me to — to faire sa connaissance?"

"Quite — convenable. But, Jackie, you have n't told me who Benny is yet. When I first met you you were alone. Is Benny a dog?"

"But, no," she cried. "He is a boy. I have adopt 'im as Madame adopt me. Benny is my brother now. He is a cripple, because that bad man, Bowman, drop him de haut en bas, so that for many years he 'as been in pain. That is why when I run away I bring 'im also with me. Is it not right? D'ailleurs, I 'ave love for 'im. When I was little I recollect that I 'ave two dolls. One was so beauti-

ful and dressed in silk; but the one I love best 'ave no legs and a broken face. I think I care for it so much more because of its infirmities. So now that I am older Benny is my broken doll. When I am become famous and rich I will 'ave 'im mended. That is what I think all the time. I shall find the most distinguished physicians and I will offer them much money to mend 'im."

Carter, standing at the mantelpiece, looked down at his little visitor with wonder and again that touch of wistfulness.

"Do you want to be rich and famous above everything?" he asked. "Is that your one and only dream, Jackie?"

"But yes. If I had no faith in my star I should be desolate. Always, always I have had this dream."

"Tell me all about it."

"My dream to dance? It began when I was so 'igh, and as I grow it grow with me. In dancing it is that I show something that is in me always — perhaps it is mon âme."

"Perhaps it is," he agreed. "And if you were perfect in your art and were recognized as a great artiste, would you have your heart's desire?"

She nodded vehemently.

"But yes. Figure it to yourself. Be'ind the curtain I am all ready in my dressing-room. It is time to appear. I wear a dress that will make all the women étourdies — what you call it?"

"Wonder?"

"Oui, c'est ça. And the music play for my dance, and already my feet dance before even I come in sight, because dancing is my métier. And as I come on the stage, I make my little steps and my big steps and my pirouette. There is a great silence, a great 'ush, until I take a pause; and then the people cry 'Jackie! Jacqueline!' and bravo

and bis many times. And I come back once more and once more to kiss my 'ands. Ah!" — she took a long breath — "to be a great artiste! That is to live!"

There spoke not the child, but the woman — the prophetic woman in her, the artiste to be. Mervyn recognized it, understood, sympathized.

"Tell me more," he said. "When you have attained all this . . . what then?"

"Is that not everything?" She became the child again. "At night I shall dance. Half the day always I shall practise. For the rest I shall drive in a carriage with white horses — or perhaps in a great white automobile, tapissé en c erise, and wear great 'ats with so many feathers . . ."

Her descent from the sublime to the ridiculous made Carter smile.

"Yes, so many 'ats," she insisted, "and — and — bijouterie also. And I shall have so many toilettes that it will be an excitement to choose the most beautiful in which to receive my m'sieur — my Mer-rveen!"

Her quick correction delighted him.

"I think I prefer you as you are," he said, meditatively. "If you're going to be so splendid what about all your humble friends, Jackie?"

"All those I love will share my good fortune," was her quick reply. "I pull the leg of you about my 'ats and my dresses," she hastened to explain. "In public I would wear the costumes outr s to make myself unique, n'est-ce pas? But at 'ome I would not be a — a scream. Oh, but I have so many dreams of all the things I shall do when I am become famous! H las!" she added, with a swift return to earth, "I am only Jackie who take the place of Sassoni's sick monkey. The technique that I began to acquire from Madame will not improve."

"That's what we're going to see about presently,"

said Carter. "But first come and have something to eat."

"Oh, but no!" she cried. "Already I 'ave eat so much! Sassoni give me money to-day because he was so pleased with your cadeau — your present. So I make a market, and at five o'clock I have eat — mais énormément! If you permit, you will accompany me instead to our appartement, and there we will 'ave a petit souper together, so that Benny may also be gay."

Anything in the nature of a children's party would have appealed to Carter. Jackie's invitation had more attractions still. There was something very compelling about her, a power which some day would act like a spell on all those with whom she was to come in contact.

"That'll be splendid," he agreed. "But I must provide the feast. I'll tell my housekeeper to pack a basket right away."

He left her to do so. When he came back he found her making a tour of inspection of the room.

"Merveen," she said with a note of regret in her voice, "it is a misfortune that you are so rich. All these things, the porcelaines and the pictures, are of great value. Is it not so?"

He assented, wondering why the fact troubled her.

"I am sorry," she pursued, "because if you were poor to a degree like myself and Benny we could have been all comrades and searched for my star together."

"But if I were poor to a degree," he said, laying his hand caressingly on her curls, "I could not help you, Jackie. You've got to let me do that, you know. Perhaps just because I'm rich I may bring your star a little nearer."

"How?" she asked, raising an interested but puzzled face.

He told her. He sketched for her the plans he already had in mind, the training she should have from Audagna — Audagna, the greatest dancing-master in the world, whom even benighted Jackie had heard of. It sounded to her like a fairy-tale. She listened enraptured, clasping and unclasping her hands.

“You would do all this for me?” She spoke with bated breath. “I cannot speak! Oh, Merveen, it is magic you make!”

“No, you will work all the magic, Jackie. You will weave spells with your beckoning hands and little dancing feet. But it will mean work — hard work for you and perhaps pain.”

“But of course. No artiste is made without work and pain. Everybody know that. But,” she hesitated, “how can I accept so much at your hands? What could I do for you to make return?”

“You can stay unspoilt, Jackie, as long as ever you can. I — I like you so.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“But when I grow up and I am become a woman, Merveen?” she inquired anxiously. “Will you be my friend still? Will you care for me then?”

“Of course,” he said.

But the conventional assertion troubled him. He knew that it conveyed but a half-truth — knew, indeed, that he would care too much . . .

X

"THE gov'nor will be here at ten-twenty."

"I know, daddy."

There was a bright blue ribbon in Milly Winter's hair. She had purposely put it there to mitigate the paleness of her face. It was a little thing, but the best she could do to create a good impression on Bowman. Ever since she had rejoined the company a fortnight ago she had thought of nothing but his return.

"You'll let me come to the station with you?" she entreated.

"No, better not. He'll want to talk business with me and Parfitt. And we've got to break it to him about the French girl and Benny. He'll be in a rare temper."

"Leave it to me to tell him. I used to be able to make him reasonable — once."

An immeasurable sadness came into Winter's face. He put his arm round Milly's shoulder.

"Don't get soft on him again," he entreated. "He's no good to you, darling."

Tears came into Milly's blue eyes.

"You can't stop caring for a person once you've begun," she said under her breath. "Besides, there's things you don't understand, daddy. I — I've *got* to go on loving him."

Winter looked away. He understood what she meant well enough. He realized only too bitterly the abjectness of the devotion, so wholly misplaced, that his bullying manager had inspired in his daughter.

"He must care for me again," she went on in a quavering voice. "After all this time, perhaps when he sees me

and how thin I've got through — through loving him, he'll turn to me."

"Don't talk like that," Winter said, almost harshly. "You're daft about the man. I'm sorry, for some things, you've come back again. What's the good of throwing yourself at him? Where's your pride, my girl?"

Milly went a little paler. Into her indeterminate face, which ill-health had robbed of much of its charm, there gradually crept a look of desperation.

"He *must* love me again. If I thought there was n't a chance of it I could n't go on living. I — I mean it."

Winter's thoughts were too bitter for words. He sighed heavily and went out of the room. The stage-manager was waiting for him at the gate. Together they set out for the station to meet Bowman.

Left alone, Milly was too disturbed to wait inactively. She went upstairs to her bedroom and studied herself in the glass. She decided to change the ribbon in her hair for a mauve one, and then altered her mind again in favour of blue. At any rate, it matched her eyes. They at least had n't lost colour. The whiteness of her face distressed her. Bill's pet name for her had been "Rosebud," because of her rosy cheeks. He would n't like a white face.

She took out some rouge and applied it to her cheeks and lips. It gave her a hectic look, made her seem nearer thirty than twenty. But still it was colour. . . . Perhaps Bill would n't think it was rouge. She dusted it over with powder, and pinned a bunch of imitation flowers into her waist. The whole effect was tawdry, but the poor child had not the eyes to see it.

She went down to the sitting-room and got out a bottle of cheap sherry which she had bought out of her small salary, and a cake of her own making. There had been a time when Bowman had complimented her on her cakes.

After a long wait she saw him coming up the road alone, striding along at a great pace. Her heart beat fast. She ran to the street door to meet him.

Without a word he took hold of her roughly by the shoulders and propelled her back into the sitting-room.

"Are — are n't you going to kiss me, Bill dear?" she asked in a faltering voice, raising an expectant face to his.

"Kiss you? What for? I've come ahead of Winter and Parfitt because they're lying to me, and I told 'em I'd have the truth out of you. Where's Jackie and the boy? You know. I'll bet you know."

"But how should I know, Bill dear?" she cried. "I never saw them. I came two days after you were taken ill. They were n't here then. Dad told me they ran away the same day."

He held her fiercely.

"You swear it is n't a put-up job? You have n't all combined to lie to me?"

"Why should we lie to you? I never would. You know that. Oh, Bill, when I heard what had happened to you I nearly went off my head. And when they wrote me you might die, I made up my mind to die too," she cried, tragically.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. When I told your father you could rejoin again I remember saying it was only on condition you were sensible." He pushed her from him. "So don't forget it. You know I did n't mean anything serious —"

"*Not serious?*" Milly broke in.

"No, of course not. But I am now, and I'll have no damn nonsense. See?" The rouge on her cheeks seemed suddenly to annoy him. "What have you been doing to your face?"

"I've been ill, too," she faltered. "I thought you would n't like to see me pale, so I —"

"You can paint yourself green for all I care," he interrupted, callously. "But it don't suit you. Jackie, now, was like a cream rose except when she flared up . . ." He turned on her fiercely. "Who the devil has been taking her part all this time?"

"I have."

"You!" he jeered. "You in short skirts and socks! What next?"

The cruel taunt made her wince.

"You — you used to think I was pretty once, Bill," she half whispered.

"Did I? Well, I've seen a lot of girls since then." He gave a short laugh. "One in particular who —"

"Not the French girl?"

"Yes, the French girl. Why not? What's it to do with you, anyway? I'm off to London to find her now."

He settled his hat on his head preparatory to departure. She tried to detain him; made piteous attempts at placating him; offered him the cake and wine. All her efforts were coldly ignored. As he went out of the room he came on Winter and his stage-manager.

"I'm off to find Jackie and the boy," he flung at them. "And if I don't, Heaven help the whole crowd of you for letting 'em slip."

He strode past them in a towering rage, back to the station, and waited fuming for the next train to London. The run up from Gueldstree, where the company were appearing that week, occupied less than an hour. On reaching Waterloo he made straight for the shop in Wardour Street and got there shortly after Madame Lemine's early dinner hour. She was asleep and deaf to the ringing of her shop bell and his impatient drubbing on the counter.

It was only when he went into the back room and bawled into her ear that she opened her eyes and sat up.

"Oh, is it you?" she said. "I have wonder this two weeks why you have not sent me the salary for Jackie. You have come to pay me now? B'en. Do you continue the engagement?"

"Continue it?" snapped Bowman. "It has n't begun yet. She has n't *earned* any salary."

"What? 'Ave you also injure Jackie so she is in hospital like the other?"

"No, she is n't. She put me there instead, and I'm only just about again. Knifed me, that's what she did! Nice sort of artistes you supply, I must say! Doing people in and robbing 'em and then quitting without notice. Where is she? Are you hiding her?"

"But why should I hide her?" demanded the old woman, in genuine dismay. "It is money out of my pocket if she is lost. She was valuable to me. I will notify the police —"

"Notify the devil! Don't you be an old fool? I think I see you making friends with the police! Calling the police in is asking for trouble. You don't want to be asked awkward questions, and I don't want it to come out I was sweet on the girl."

Madame's eyebrows went up.

"Sweet on Jackie! Chouette alors! But how does that arrive?"

"Oh, ask me another!"

"You make love to her? That little coquin! Why you wish to do that?"

"Why do I wish to wash?" returned Bowman surlily. "It's a way I've got at times, I suppose. Look here, I mean to find her. You say she's valuable to you. Well, she's valuable to me, too. She'll be the big screech one

day. Sure and certain. She's got to be found. If she has n't been here, where can she —"

He left his sentence unfinished as the shop bell rang.

Madame rose ponderously to answer it. Bowman followed her, eager to get away. She was obviously ignorant of Jackie's whereabouts, equally incensed at her disappearance, and unable to help him. But when he got into the shop he found the doorway blocked by a small Italian with rings in his ears and his hat in his hand.

"Scusi," said he, and addressed Madame in the language of Soho, which Bowman was hardly able to follow. His name was Sassoni — Pietro Sassoni, he lived round the corner and he owned a barrel-organ — *uno organo piano di cinque arie*. But five tunes only! He was poor. Oh, but poor! *Sono povero, poverissimo!* Could Madama hire him a little one to dance to his music? He could pay not much; but for *una ragazza* — a girl. So high. (He held the palm of his hand three feet from the floor.) Madama would of course ask but little.

Madame's interest in organ-grinders would not have been conspicuous at any time. But in a poor one who could not pay it was negligible. She made that clear at once. The fact did not abash Pietro at all.

"Until — a last week," he went on, "I 'ave verra good dancer. She make-a money better as monkey. But now she come no more, and the monkey is sick — *scabioso*. Nobody give the copper any more, and the *polizia* 'e say 'move on.' A girl to dance I must 'ave. Never will any other dance like Jackie!" he finished mournfully.

Bowman pricked up his ears.

"Did you say Jackie?" he demanded. "A dancer?"

"Si, si, signor."

"Had she a boy with her? A cripple?"

The Italian could not say. All he knew was that a girl

who called herself Jackie had accosted him in the street and offered to dance for him for the fewest of shillings. He neither knew where she lived nor what her full name was — nothing else about her at all. And he was in despair because she had failed him. His monkey still had mange and his wife yet another bambino. Without the assistance of a cheap little one like Jackie to dance to the organ he would surely starve in hard times such as these.

Bowman took out his pocketbook and extracted from it a ten-shilling note. Pietro looked and his fingers twitched.

“Where do you hang out?” asked Bowman, and was duly informed. “Now, see here,” he said. “The girl you’ve been talking about — Jackie — belongs to Madame here. She’s her grandma. She’s lost her.” He gave Madame a covert wink. “She has n’t any other dancer to hire out. But if I give you this will you hunt about for Jackie?”

Pietro protested he would do nothing else.

“Well, here you are. And here’s my card. If you come across her write to this address at once. Or, better still, wire — telegraph; and then I’ll give you two more pounds. Understand?”

Pietro quite understood. He pocketed the note and the card with profuse thanks and promises, and departed to begin his search subito, oh, but molto subito!

In grim silence Bowman licked the stump of a pencil and wrote in his notebook.

“My score against Jackie,” he explained to Madame. “It’s mounting up!”

XI

THE candles Jackie had placed before St. Anthony were burning low. With a pang at his heart Benny wondered whether she would remember her careless promise to return before they went out. It hardly seemed likely. She was so beside herself with delight at the prospect of meeting her m'sieur that she would be certain to forget it.

He waited on in the semi-darkness, too despondent to light the lamp. This was the first evening Jackie and he had not spent together. He foresaw that there would be many such evenings: hours of anxiety and suspense for him, since he was unable to keep ward and watch over her. Already the thought rankled that it was she who protected him, who provided for him, had constituted herself the "head of the family." The physical disability that made him a cripple and a creature to be pitied filled him with consuming bitterness. Never before in all his life had he so wished to be strong and straight and like others of his age. Although he was verging on manhood he had nothing to look forward to but a vista of pain-filled years. For the last fortnight the pain had been bearable, because except during her dancing hours Jackie had been with him. Now it was borne in upon him that he could not always expect to keep her tied to his side. She would dance away again and again, obeying the call of nature: light, music, laughter, love — and the dance-song of youth.

It stood to reason that the fuller her life became the emptier his must grow. He pulled himself up, well aware that such thoughts were selfish and ignoble and unworthy of her. Whatever the future might hold for him, he was

the happier and the better for having known and loved her.

Sitting there, he recalled almost in detail the happy hours of their brief companionship, more particularly the inexpressibly human and tender way in which she had soothed him and diverted his thoughts whenever they harked back to his dream and the deed which he believed he had committed in his sleep. Every day, too, she had shown him fresh tendernesses, or a new phase of her many-faceted nature. They were none the less sweetly consoling because they were the tendernesses of a child. Sometimes he wondered what, as a woman's, they would one day develop into . . . what the vasts and deeps of such a love as she would surely inspire would mean. This was beyond his conjecture. But when he tried to imagine the man who assuredly would come into her life his heart grew dark.

And now at the first beckoning of a stranger she had flown off; so eager to be gone, so exuberantly happy. Why not? Their intimacy could not have held any magic for her; only for him. He must be satisfied with the crumbs that fell from her table. He tried pitifully hard to drill his mind into a state of submission.

The door of her room was ajar. The burning candles were fast diminishing. Anxious thoughts, fears for her safety, assailed him. Suppose she was mistaken in her estimate of this man whom she extolled so highly; suppose that he was nothing better than the typical stage-door hanger-on, the type that will accost a girl in the street for the sake of a light adventure? How should Jackie in her inexperience know him for what he was? Girls were so queer. There was Milly Winter, for instance, a nice girl, well-brought-up in spite of the shifts of a life on tour. Yet Benny knew that in her love-blinded eyes Bowman,

sober only one evening out of seven, was a positive hero. Milly had been a good little girl, one of the best . . . It had been a sad sight to watch the unfolding of her tragic love-affair.

Suppose Jackie got into the hands of a man like that: more polished, perhaps, a gentleman very likely, but as unscrupulous as Bowman, as ruthless in love. Would unsuspecting Jackie fare better than a grown woman like Milly?

The candles before St. Anthony flickered in their sockets. In a few minutes they would be out. Benny rested his head in his hands. A sob shook him. He gave himself up to an impotent fit of weeping, realizing how little he could do to help his little friend if she were in danger.

He did not hear steps on the uncarpeted stairs nor Jackie's voice outside cautioning somebody to "ave care on the top step because it is worn away."

Only when the door was flung open did he raise his head to discern dimly the outline of Jackie's slender figure and that of another behind her.

The draught from the opened door finally extinguished the guttering candles in the other room. She had been true to her promise and had returned before they burnt out.

"Benny, where are you?" she called. "I have brought my m'sieur. Get a light, my dear. We are going to be so gay altogether. Make haste."

In the kindly darkness Benny wiped the traces of tears from his cheeks and groped his way to the mantelpiece for matches. He lit the lamp and set it in the middle of the table.

The man who had followed Jackie in closed the door. One look at him was sufficient to dissipate all Benny's misgivings. This friend of Jackie's, whoever and what-

ever he might be, was a gentleman — such a gentleman as Benny until now had never encountered, though he could recognize him as such on the instant.

Kind eyes. Yes, they twinkled in the lamplight as Jackie had described. Friendly eyes: eyes that warranted the man at once, leaving one in no manner of doubt as to his character. He could not be a stealer of hearts or a betrayer of trusts. He was as straight as Benny's back was crooked.

Smiling, he held out his hand, and without hesitation Benny placed his in the firm friendly grip. He knew that the traces of his tears were still upon his cheeks, but under the kindly regard of the stranger he no longer felt ashamed of them.

"I was anxious about Jackie," he admitted frankly.

"But I hastened, did I not?" she demanded. "And we have brought a petit souper with us, my dear, to celebrate our comradeship of three."

The way in which she included him brought balm to Benny's soul. He would have been a churl to harbour any further jealousy. Indeed he felt none. Jackie's friend was already his friend. He accepted him without reserve.

"What happiness that we all meet," cried Jackie ecstatically. "Is not my m'sieur all that I have said, Benny? Look well at him and you will say you are glad that I have found him again."

Carter made a deprecatory gesture and with a laugh said: "That's a tall order, Jackie. It's like asking him to swim across Charles River to get to Boston."

The simile was lost on her, but Benny's attention was immediately arrested by it.

"He must n't jump to conclusions as fast as all that," Carter continued. "Honest doubt is the beacon of the wise, Shakespeare says."

Honest doubt! Benny's conscience pricked him. A while ago his prejudices had carried him away. But he almost forgot that fact in the unexpected allusion to Boston.

"Say," he ventured; "have you ever been in Boston?"

"I was born there."

"Born in Boston! Then you're — we're both Americans!"

Carter nodded. His twinkling eyes went to Jackie.

"There, you hear that. A happy omen, is n't it?"

Jackie clapped her hands.

"America is where I go one day. All the great dancers go there. Oh, I am glad that you and Benny are patriots! Now we shall all three voyage there together and speak the same language! Mon Dieu, I haste to unpack the basket and the wine to make the celebration!"

A comprehensible nostalgia kept Benny talking to Carter about New York and Boston while she laid the table.

There was no cloth. She did not apologize for its absence. She assumed that others, like herself, were gifted with enough imagination to make a clean newspaper appear the equivalent of the finest lace-edged damask that money could buy; and cheap crockery, by the same magical process, transform itself into dainty china. Benny was accustomed to this game of make-believe, because Jackie was always playing at it with the seriousness of a child, to whom dreams, topsy-turvily, are still realities. But to Carter the mind-magic, which could conjure fires into empty grates and carpets on bare boards, was a new and delightful thing. It brought Jackie and fairyland into still closer relation.

As a finishing touch she fetched St. Anthony — directly responsible for this happy meeting — and placed him with all due solemnity in the centre of the table, flanked on either side by his bowls of flowers.

If the table appointments were meagre the viands with which Carter's housekeeper had filled the basket made up for them. In Jackie's eyes it contained unbelievable dainties. Her candid enjoyment of them all and her enthusiasm over weak claret and water made Carter feel like a schoolboy at his first play. Afterwards, disdainng assistance, Jackie cleared away and washed up. She conducted the latter operation at a sink on the landing outside, leaving her two friends to entertain one another.

A fine instinct had already apprised Carter of Benny's solicitude for Jackie. It showed in his eyes whenever he looked at her, in his voice whenever he addressed her. Carter had also sensed something of his qualms about himself. They were natural and commendable. He was glad of the opportunity to dispel them. He drew his chair closer and laid a friendly hand on the boy's.

"You won't worry any more about Jackie now, will you, sonny?" he said. "I'd like you to trust me as much as she does. Do you think you can? I know I'm a complete stranger to you, and not much more than one to her, but I want you to forget that. I want to be a real friend to her and to you as well, if you'll let me."

By this time Benny had got himself into a frame of mind to believe readily in the other's good faith.

"I know," he said. "I've loved her from the first minute I saw her. You can't help it. I love her so much," he added in a lower tone, "that I've hated the idea of her caring for any one else, ever."

The admission was a plea for an unwarranted jealousy; it also implied contrition.

"But that won't do, sonny," rejoined Carter. "Friendship and love are the two finest qualities human beings can feel. Real friendship ought to make us want to think of nothing but the well-being of those to whom we give it,

otherwise it ceases to be friendship or love and merely degenerates into selfishness. You could n't, for example, expect to keep Jackie to yourself for the rest of your life, any more than I could. We've got to share her out with all the many people she'll meet and love, and who will love her. She's like the sun. She's got to shine on everything and everybody. She's built that way. We don't appreciate a glorious day any the less because other people enjoy it as well, do we? Everything in life and nature ought to be shared out all the time; and in art it always is. By and by, when we get over the feeling of monopoly — wanting a thing all to ourselves — it dawns on us that it's a virtue to let others share in it."

He waited until Benny accepted his proposition with a tardy nod, and then continued:

"Now, listen. I'm well-off. It's my good fortune to be able to do a little good with my money — to try to help other people not so fortunate as myself. Not out of charity; not by money presents. The motives of the man who makes money presents are often questioned, and rightly so. People think he's out to get something in return. That's not so in my case. I just want to make Jackie happy. And I also want to convince you that I have n't any other object. It would n't occur to Jackie that I had. She's too much of a child. But you're old enough to think for her and to know what's best for her good. I'm counting on you because you love her, Benny. You'll trust me, won't you?"

"Sure."

"Well, then, we'll fix it. I mean to do a lot of things for Jackie, and you'll have to help. I want to make the star she's always talking about shine clear. That does n't mean I shall take her away from you. Get that out of your head, Benny."

Benny's lips quivered. He turned to Carter emotionally.

"I've not had such a thought since you came in. I think — yes — I'm glad — mighty glad — you're going to be her friend."

"And yours, Benny, I hope," said Carter as Jackie opened the door.

A quieter mood was upon her. With apologies for the economy she turned the lamp low. There would not be enough paraffin for to-morrow if it continued to burn. The moon and the stars illumined the room. There were only two chairs, so she sat on the floor clasping her knees and listened to Carter sketching his plans for her future. The expression on her face, upturned to his, was enrapt. The new surroundings in which she was to be placed, the various phases of the training she was to undergo, were swallowed up in the result they were to lead to. Her imagination supplied it. She saw herself in a blaze of light and colour, whirling to the rhythm of a great and splendid orchestra, vibrating like a bird in flight to its every note and phrase. She felt herself swinging to its melody until, at its *cadenza*, every movement abruptly arrested, she stood immobile as a statue, drinking in the joy of applause, listening and bowing to thunderous acclamations; while above her, brightest of all in the surrounding blaze of light, shone her star now full in the ascendant.

Afterwards, when Carter had gone, she passed her arm round Benny's neck and stood with him at the window looking out on the bespangled sky.

"See what a lot of stars," she murmured. "One each for everybody. See how brightly mine is shining. That one over there. Is it not wonderful all this that my m'sieu will effect for me? Oh, but now I must deserve it! If,

after all, I was only of the crowd, one amongst many, never to sparkle, I should be too sad. But a little while ago I wished to be a star to please myself, for the glory and the fame; but now above everything, I wish to be a star to please him."

Benny pondered her words. After a while he said:

"Jackie . . . suppose you had to choose between this fame you want and your friend. Suppose you could n't have both?"

Jackie turned from her contemplation of the sky.

"Why, I would choose my friend, of course," she replied without hesitation. "For him I would pluck my star out of the sky and place it at his feet."

"But that's — love, Jackie," he cried, startled.

"Is it? It is my heart," she said, simply. "But he would not wish for my star at his feet. He desires for me to remain always a little girl. So pray that I never grow up at all, my Benny, *chéri*."

Benny turned away, a little saddened. It was given to him to know just then what she herself was unaware of, what Mervyn Carter was far from dreaming — that her woman-soul with its vasts and deeps of tenderesses had already stirred in its birth-sleep. . . .

XII

AN envelope, postmarked London, addressed in the clear (but in this instance unformed) spherical handwriting to which the French are addicted, lay upon the mantelshelf awaiting Bowman. It had been redirected several times, having followed him from town to town. It had engaged the attention of Milly Winter ever since it had arrived. The superscription "Monsieur B. Bowman," set her thinking at once of "the French girl." She was sure the letter was from her. Once or twice feminine curiosity got the better of her, and she picked it up to examine it. Of course it told her nothing. Envelopes seldom do say much.

Bowman came in. After looking about him he asked: "Where's your father?"

"Gone to the doctor's for some cough medicine. He said we were n't to wait tea for him."

"As if I should! Your dad's getting balmy in his old age, my girl. Seems to think he's the big screech because he ran the show while I was in hospital. If he was n't such a blooming crock I'd have given him a bit of my mind before this for his damned cheek. So, I need n't wait for him! My word! He's sulking because he could n't get separate lodgings in the town for you and him." He grinned. "Silly old owl. As if living in another street could make any difference to you and me, or any other girl I had a fancy for!"

"But you don't care for me now, Bill," said Milly doubtfully.

Bowman regarded her with his head on one side.

"I don't say that I might n't want to kiss you when there's no one else handy," he remarked jocularly. "Af-

ter all, you've got a loving heart. You're a clinging vine."

At any rate, she had ceased to cling to him of late, and had summoned up the little pride she had left to keep out of his way. Moreover, she had faithfully promised her father that she would be a sensible girl, a good girl. And she had meant it. Until to-day she and Bowman had scarcely spoken a word to each other in private.

Bowman, however, had watched her efforts to be indifferent to him with cruel amusement. Then a new man in the company, a young actor, had started to pay her attentions, the kind of attentions her father did not resent because they were evidently honourable ones. And Milly, heartsick, had responded to them in her desire to forget. Bowman foresaw a little diversion for himself. Milly had been looking prettier lately . . . He had n't philandered with a girl for a fortnight . . . He knew he had only to lift his little finger and she would obey its signal. She was of the type that loves one man only with slavish abnegation. Still, he was n't quite sure whether she was worth the trouble. He had n't made up his mind. The quest of Jackie, still fruitless, obsessed him.

Milly appeared to ignore his crudely amorous remark, although it had made her poor heart quicken.

"There's a letter for you," she said, raising her eyes from her needlework to the mantelpiece. "Is it from the French girl?"

Bowman strode over to it.

"Why did n't you tell me that when I came in?" he demanded, seizing it. "I expect it's from the Italian with news about her."

He tore it open. It was not from the Italian. It was from Jackie herself. The letter bore no date and gave no address. Three postal orders were enclosed in it.

M. Bowman,

I send you three £ five s—which I was constrain to make a loan of. I hop you have entirely recovered.

Yours truly

Jacqueline

Please to understand that I bare no malice since having found my monsieur I have cease to hate you.

Bowman swore and tore the letter into small pieces. The postal orders he pocketed. He would far rather that Jackie had proved herself a thief as well as the tentative murderess he believed her to be. Then he would have had a real hold over her.

Milly watched him intently, noticing the rancorous expression on his face. Curiosity and perhaps jealousy prompted her to say

“Was it from the French girl? I know I’ve no right to ask —”

“Oh, you can ask.” He was gracious for once, irrationally inclined to be amorous again because Jackie was out of reach. “It is from the French girl.”

“Is she coming back?”

“No.”

Milly could not help feeling glad.

“What made her write to you?”

“Because she wanted to. Any more questions?”

“Was she — is she in love with you?”

It seemed to Milly that this was almost a foregone conclusion. Bowman’s innate vanity responded to the pleasant imputation.

“Well, I suppose so,” he said.

“Are you going to — to meet her?”

“Not yet.”

He would have to find her first; and when he did the score he had to settle would not be based on love. But

of that he had no intention of saying anything to Milly. He was in a freakish mood this afternoon, a mood for dalliance. The spring was in his blood. At rehearsal that morning he had heard Measurer pressing Milly to go for a walk with him after the show — Milly whom he, Bowman, had tired of so quickly! That another and that other a younger man should find her attractive was stimulus enough to make him take notice of her again. For the time being he wiped Jackie from the slate of his mind and applied himself to reclaiming what he had never lost . . . Hang it, a man must have his sport! That it was sport unworthy of the name, the letting fly at a sitting bird or taking advantage of an unfortunate woman, did not occur to him.

“What d’ you want to talk about Jackie for?” he asked with rough pleasantry. “She’s nothing to you. You’ve not even seen her. Would n’t you rather talk about yourself and me? It’s a long time since we’ve found ourselves together, old girl. Like old times, is n’t it? Going to give me a kiss?”

“Don’t, Bill.” She put him from her weakly. “You know you don’t care, and I promised dad —”

“Don’t you want to be friends again?”

“You said you did n’t. You said I was to be sensible and that you werè through with me. You can’t say I’ve ever run after you since, although you nearly broke my heart.”

“Did I?” Bowman could put a hint of tender regret into his voice when he thought it would pay to do so. “Well, suppose I try to mend it? Have you ever tried love and kisses for patching up the cracks?”

He put his arms round her and masterfully demonstrated what he meant.

“There’s nightingales in Poole Park,” he said. “We’ll

take a walk and hear them sing to-night. I'll make your heart sing too. Shall I, kid?"

Down went her head on his shoulder. Had she half promised young Measurer to stroll home with him? If so, she could put him off. He was only a boy in love. Bowman was the man who held her heart in fee.

"Dad will be angry," she said, fearfully. "But I'd like to come . . . what's the good of pretending I would n't? Bill, we were listening to nightingales last year when you kissed me for the first time. I'll never forget."

"Were we?" Bowman had forgotten that particular occasion. It was one among so many.

"Why, yes, don't you remember? And you picked me some wild anemones that were shining like silver in the moonlight. They're in my Bible now."

Bowman kept silence. Case-hardened sinner though he was, it made him feel vaguely ashamed when she spoke of the sacred emotions that he, the profane, had aroused in her gentle heart.

"Well, will you come?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

"After supper then . . . You can let your father think you're going for a stroll with that young jackanapes. He won't mind."

Milly flushed.

"I hate deceiving him," she said uneasily. "I promised him it was all over between us . . ."

"So it was. But that does n't mean it was never going to begin again, does it?"

He had complete mastery over her will. Still, to quiet the pangs of conscience, she demurred feebly.

"What's the use, Bill? You don't want me to come — really."

"I've a fancy I do. Anyway, you'd best chuck young Measurer. You don't want a boy like that for a husband."

Husband! The word on his lips sent a shiver of exultation through her. Was it, after all, in his wayward heart to care for her sufficiently to encourage her to think of marriage with him and at last to redeem her pride?

"He has n't asked me to marry him," she murmured. "We're only friends."

"What would you say if he did?" Bowman teased.

"I don't know," she floundered. "Daddy would be glad to see me settled."

"What would you say to marrying me?" His arms went round her. He felt the tremor of her responding frame.

"Oh, Bill, don't! It is n't fair. You don't want to marry —"

The devils of baulked desire egged Bowman on. Jackie was out of sight, out of reach. Here was a less wild bird that would eat gratefully out of her snarer's hand.

"We'll talk about it in Poole Park later on," he promised. "There's no saying what I might n't want . . ."

Winter's entry put a stop to his slim advances. The old actor carried a bottle of medicine, and sat down to his tea in a state of gloomy apathy. Now and then his eyes travelled from Bowman's bulldog immobile countenance to Milly's unwontedly radiant one. Her eyes shone. Her cheeks glowed. He noticed the change in her and connected it uneasily with Bowman, while hate and resentment smouldered afresh in his heart.

He did not see Milly alone or he would have questioned her. After supper that night she slipped away and he missed her; but he knew she sometimes went for a stroll with Measurer, and her absence did not trouble him. He

liked the lad and would have welcomed him as a son-in-law.

But when twelve o'clock struck and still Milly did not make her appearance, he began to fidget. Finally he went to Measurer's lodgings at the end of the street to make enquiries. Measurer was in, just going to bed. No, he had n't been out at all. Milly had said she had a headache and could n't go for a walk that evening, so he had gone straight from the theatre to his diggings.

"I expect she got in before you did and went up to bed," he suggested. "She would n't be out by herself, would she?"

"No . . . she would n't be out by herself," Winter agreed gloomily. "Good-night, dear boy."

He turned away, full of uneasiness. On his return he found Bowman in the sitting-room refreshing himself with whiskey and soda.

"Have you seen Milly?" he asked anxiously. "She's not come in yet."

Bowman emptied his glass, set it down and smacked his lips.

"Oh, yes she has. She's upstairs. Gone to bed. It's lovely out. We've been listening to the nightingales in Poole Park."

Winter's eyes dilated.

"*You've* been out with her?" he exclaimed. "What for?"

"Well! If that is n't a question! What do men go out with girls for when there's nightingales and a moon? Call it love if you like. One word's as good as another."

The bravado, the cynical indifference, enraged Winter. His face contorted with passion. He waited a minute before he could speak. Then he said in a shaky voice:

"The doctor told me to-day that I can't last more than

a few months . . . Well, I'm going to see Milly settled before I die . . . You know there's some one who wants her. If you come between them and lie to her and lead her on again with your devil's promises, as sure as there's a God in heaven I'll — I'll kill you!"

His hands opened and shut convulsively.

"Kill away, you blessed old shadow!" Bowman pushed back his chair and laughed. "Why, young Jackie, if she started in, would make a better job of it than you're ever likely to!"

XIII

BEFORE the full-length portrait of "Irene, daughter of the Earl of Marlbury," painted by John Grandison, Virginia Marlbury, catalogue in hand, came to a stop. It was an arresting piece of work, as everything from Grandison's brush invariably was. It was said that he painted women cruelly; yet women flocked to his studio. A feverish curiosity made them want to see their innermost souls depicted on canvas.

Grandison was a master of his art, and he also had the courage of youth. He had worked hard in order to achieve fame: the desire to make money had been a secondary consideration with him. He had always painted to please himself, and as generally happens with those of undeniable talent he had, at an unusually early stage in his career, become the most fashionable portraitist of the day. In the main he was hostile to women. He showed it through the medium of his art instead of in words. But he had not done this in Irene's case.

That was the reason, coupled with others more definite, why Virginia was regarding the portrait with a frown. Grandison had painted Irene as an artist paints who is in love with his sitter. The picture was a lover's picture as well as an artist's triumph.

Irene, as Virginia could but admit, was a delight to the eye. Her beauty was very patrician; breeding was exemplified in her from the crown of her finely shaped head to the arch of her well-formed feet. Grandison had done full justice to all this and a great deal more besides.

Virginia sat down on one of the fauteuils. An ever-moving, freshly forming, crowd pressed around the por-

trait. She listened to all she could hear. She had come partly to see and partly to listen. What she heard did not ease her mind. By and by she got up, left the gallery, got into her car, and drove home.

She went straight up to her stepdaughter's bedroom. Irene was trying on a fancy dress which she intended to wear that night at the Three Arts Ball. It was a remarkable dress, as arresting in its way as herself or her picture by Grandison. The novelty of its design and the brilliance of its colouring confounded Virginia.

"Good gracious, Irene!" she exclaimed. "How very gorgeous! What on earth is it supposed to be?"

"John calls it 'The Blazon of Beauty,'" Irene replied with a laugh. "He designed it. Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful enough. But you need n't have gone to that man for an idea." Strong disapproval marked the second statement.

Whenever Irene was annoyed she showed it by an increase of pallor. Grandison said it was her patrician way of repelling an affront to her dignity.

"What is the good of talking like that, Virginia? I thought the subject was closed. We've been into it so often before."

Virginia sat down. She did it with the deliberation of a judge about to try a case, but with none of a judge's absence of bias. She meant to make one more effort to dissuade Irene from following a line of conduct which she considered both foolish and indiscreet.

"You know I've always tried to be a true friend to you," she began. "I don't pretend to exercise the privileges of a mother. I'm not old enough. No third person, however well-meaning, ought to go as far as that. But, Irene, I've done my best to be an elder sister to you, and I hope I've succeeded."

Irene was willing to concede all this and more. She nodded assent. But the solemn mode of address made her want to laugh.

"Dear Virginia! You take yourself so awfully seriously. You're much too young to sermonize. I know you think you ought to. But please don't. It won't do me a bit of good, and it *may* give you clergyman's face, which is much worse than housemaid's knee because it's bound to show. Why don't you take life as it comes and let things rip, as I do? Father does n't bother about me. Why should you?"

It did not at all suit Virginia to allow her husband's attitude to be taken as an example. There was a great deal too much opportunism about him. Her own code of propriety — that of New England — was, she felt assured, much better suited to the occasion.

"I'm quite sure that your father has not fully realized how indiscreet you have been," she rejoined. "Honestly, Irene, your friendship with Mr. Grandison ought to stop. Every one is talking about it. Everybody knows the whole story — his version of it. I went to see your portrait this afternoon. People were gossiping dreadfully. All sorts of people! It was really revolting."

Irene faced round from the glass. She was not much more than a girl, but at times she could be very stately.

"I can't discuss my heart with you, Virginia," she said. "Mr. Grandison and I love one another. That we can't get married because he has an incurable wife in a lunatic asylum does n't and can't alter the fact. There is nothing wrong in meeting as we do, and there's certainly no harm in my refusing to marry any other man because I can't have the one I want. That's a matter for myself, is n't it?"

The quiet obduracy exasperated Virginia.

"But people are talking!" she cried. "Not only those in our own set. I mean the crowd. Impossible people! I dread gossip about you getting into the papers! Surely you don't want to be talked about on the street and in papers that our own kitchenmaids read!"

"What do you want me to do? To correct wrong impressions and explain the exact quality of my regard for Mr. Grandison in the kitchen? I dare say if the situation were put before the servants they would have more real understanding of it than you, Virginia. I'm not going to give up this friendship. We're not ashamed of it. It's all we've got, and it's a wholesome one. We've kept it so."

"I'm not asking you to cut him," Virginia said, resolutely. "I only want you to silence all this horrible gossip by getting married. You can't marry Mr. Grandison. You admit that yourself. Why not somebody else then? Somebody eligible. You would n't be able to help loving him in the end."

A note of hesitancy in the last words convinced Irene that they were in the nature of special pleading.

"Loving whom?" she queried, suspiciously.

"Well — Mervyn."

Irene looked relieved.

"Dear Mervyn! He deserves a far better wife than I could ever be. Besides, I'm perfectly sure he would n't have me if I were given away with a pound of tea. It's no good, Virginia. I dare say it's an open secret that the reason I keep single is because I'm fond of a man who is n't free. You need n't make things harder by rubbing it in. I try to make the best of things by bowing to fate, not quarrelling with it. I should be really wicked if I married some one I did n't care for. Surely you must understand. Think how you would feel if you had married father without loving him."

Virginia had nothing to say. All unconsciously, Irene had flicked her on the raw. She lingered a little, and then, realizing how ineffectual her efforts had been to break down what she deemed to be an infatuation for an undesirable lover, left her and, for once in a way, went to enlist the moral support of her husband.

She found Marlbury in the hall, just about to go out. In desperation she buttonholed him and began pouring out her woes. He listened patiently enough, but with rather a weary expression on his ruddy, debonair face.

"But what can I do?" he asked helplessly. "Irene's bound to be in love with somebody. I've heard rumours about her and Grandison. Don't suppose there's much in it. People with nothing to do always exaggerate. If I were you I should n't take any notice of their talk. Best leave Irene alone. Every one's got their own troubles. Is n't it George Meredith who says, 'Every girl after she's reached the age of twenty-five has the right to choose her own life'? Can't say I exactly see why, but there you are!"

"Oh, novelists will say anything!" Virginia declared petulantly. "Irene and Grandison are n't characters in fiction. They happen to be real people."

"I like Grandison," mused Marlbury. "Fine painter."

"But he's got a wife already!"

"I know. Very sad affair. Insanity in her family, I believe, and he was n't told. Poor chap, he's been as good as a widower for years."

Sympathy for her *bête noire* did not placate Virginia. She wanted it all for herself.

"What I want you to do," she said, "is to put your foot down. You must. Forbid Irene having anything more to do with Grandison. It's your duty."

"But hang it all, Virginia, I don't see how I can. Grandison goes about everywhere. He's not a bad egg.

And as far as I can see Irene is n't behaving scandalously. She's much too sensible. Besides, who am I to sit in judgment on her? I'm not exactly perfect myself. That's not been altogether my fault, though."

Virginia looked uncomfortable, but she made no rejoinder, so after a pause Marlbury continued:

"Pity we've got so far apart — too far for us to bridge it over in private. You married me for my position and told me so afterwards when I claimed your — love."

"That has nothing to do with Irene," she said in a low tone.

"I think it has. It's the reason why you should n't interfere and why I can't. We both know that marriage without love is an empty thing. If Irene chooses to follow the dictates of her heart she won't go very far wrong. At any rate, she'll be spared making a mistake like ours."

"Then you won't help me? You won't do anything?"

"I can only advise you to give up worrying about Irene. If Grandison is worthy of her, so much the better. If he is n't, she'll find it out. You've told her what you think. Why not leave it at that? I can't stay now, Virginia. I've an appointment."

She did not detain him. It was not of the least consequence to her where he went or with whom he chose to associate. She eschewed curiosity; she considered it vulgar. It was this very indifference that had driven him to drown his matrimonial disappointments in mild dissipation among cheerful companions — gay friends, very many of them good friends, men and women of Bohemia with whom Virginia would have scorned to rub shoulders. . . .

When he had gone she stood still, discomfited, a little disconcerted, very much annoyed at being so completely thwarted. She honestly considered it her duty to

break down Irene's obstinacy. But how was it to be done? Even Mervyn, her own brother, seemed as unaccountably wayward and impossible as Marlbury.

Not to be beaten, she decided to entreat him once more to propose to Irene, if only in the name of chivalry and friendship. With this intention she ordered her car round again and drove straight to his flat.

The front door stood ajar. Virginia walked right in. Mervyn was not in the drawing-room. But to her amazement in one of the armchairs, curled up like a kitten, lay a foreign-looking girl, dressed in a bizarre costume, fast asleep.

XIV

VIRGINIA came to an astonished stop. Her eyes seemed to be deceiving her. What was this extraordinary creature doing in her brother's flat? The sight offended her dignity. She looked at the sleeping girl with undisguised repugnance. A scorpion or a black beetle would not have had a more disturbing effect on her! Then curiosity got the better of her and she went a step nearer in order to study the "strange creature" at close range.

Very soon she recognized her as the girl who had danced to a barrel-organ in the street outside her own house, and whom Mervyn had dashed out to greet with such impetuous haste. Jackie still wore her semi-Italian dress, an outlandish one in Virginia's estimation. Half a minute elapsed before she felt obliged to admit, grudgingly enough, that the wearer was remarkably attractive, though not of a type that appealed to herself. It was too unusual, too striking. What she did recognize was that this child, when older, would have a clarion-call for most men. She hoped that Mervyn had not already heard it. She had her fears. That in such short space of time he had become sufficiently intimate with her to allow her to make herself at home and to fall asleep in his drawing-room in this unconcerned fashion disturbed her greatly. She saw all her plans for him crumbling away.

But there might be time to prevent such a disaster. Why should she not profit by the unexpected encounter, have a few words with this undesirable girl, and make her understand that her acquaintance with Mervyn was an outrage and that it must immediately cease? She gave a

dignified cough and moved a chair in order to rouse the sleeper.

The disturbance did not have the desired effect. Jackie only shifted her position slightly and murmured:

"Merveen! Ah, que je vous aime!"

The use of her brother's Christian name incensed Virginia. She had a strong inclination to slap the dreaming girl, but controlled herself sufficiently to be contented with a vigorous shake. Jackie awoke, sat up, and looked drowsily around.

"Where are you, Merveen?" she yawned.

"What are you doing here?" Virginia demanded tartly.

Jackie fixed big sleepy eyes on the speaker.

"Do you usually make a practice of coming here to sleep afternoons?" Virginia proceeded suspiciously.

By this time Jackie was sufficiently wide awake to understand that she was being addressed by a strange lady in beautiful, sweet-smelling apparel.

"But no," she replied innocently, "that is not habitual with me. But this morning, madame, I get up at four o'clock to go to the — what you call it? *marché aux fleurs*."

"Indeed! Are you a flower-girl, then?"

Virginia took in the profusion of flowers. The room was gay with them. They stood in vases and bowls on the tables, on the mantelpiece, on the window-sills — cheap flowers, and, to her taste, far too many. They made her think of an overgrown rustic garden.

"No, but I arrange them all myself," was the reply, made with pride. "I have bought them for a surprise for Merveen. He do so much for me, and all night long I have think about it so much that my heart become bigger and bigger with gratitude. In the morning, therefore, I rise

and go to buy flowers in the market garden where they are so plentiful and fresh. I 'ad three shillings only, but a kind man gave me all that my arms would hold because I tell him that I wish to buy them for a love-gift. Also I have brought some cabbages with good 'earts, because one cannot purchase the like in the shops. Feel for yourself, madame, 'ow firm and 'ow fresh!"

She dived underneath her chair and produced her cabbages.

Virginia drew back. The vegetables disgusted her. She resented their introduction into a daintily furnished, expensively carpeted drawing-room, even though it was not hers. It was more than an anomaly; it was a gross indignity.

"Mr. Carter will be horrified at your bringing vegetables in here. It is perfectly outrageous of you to lay them on an antique Persian carpet worth hundreds of pounds!"

"It is very likely," admitted Jackie. The price of the carpet seemed to her an extraneous matter. She did not reproach herself with depositing the cabbages upon it. The cabbages were quite clean. What harm could they possibly do to a carpet? She could not understand the strange lady's objection. "My m'sieur has great wealth," she added in order to reassure her, but only succeeded in instilling Virginia with the belief that she had a possessive interest in both.

"I am the little friend of M'sieur Merveen," she proceeded blandly. "I do not think he would be angry at what I do. Certainly he will not have anger because I have made him a small present of flowers and cabbages." She regarded Virginia thoughtfully. "I do not think that you can know him very well. Perhaps you do not love him so much as I do."

Virginia felt that she had heard quite enough of that obsolete and unnecessary word "love" to-day. Irene had used it. Even Marlbury had referred to it. Now here it was on this French girl's lips. It annoyed her exceedingly.

"It is most unbecoming of a girl of your age to talk about love," she said severely. "As it happens I have known Mr. Carter all my life."

The admission roused Jackie's interest. It did not yet occur to her that this elegant lady might be a relation of her m'sieur's. She could detect no resemblance to him. But there was a better reason; the want of a link of sympathy between herself and the other. Had there been one she would have seized on it. She would have revered any lifelong friend of his; she would have been ready to lavish love on his most distant relative; it would have been induced by her adoration for him. However, she was quite ready to talk about him by the hour if necessary, to extol his virtues and to hear them extolled. She was neither old enough nor experienced enough to want to hide her hero worship.

"And I," she returned, "have only know him for three days. He is to me what we say in French, a great bien-faiteur. He make me many *bénéfices* — much more than I would wish to take. He will have Audagna, the great ballet-master, to teach me dancing. Is not that magnificent?"

"Perfectly idiotic," was Virginia's inward reply. Mervyn must be infatuated with the girl. She must put a stop to that if she could. "Are you not still dancing to an organ?" she enquired in a chilly voice.

At this Jackie looked slightly surprised.

"Has Merveen spoke to you of me, then?" she asked in turn.

"Oh, dear, no! Not at all!" Virginia had no intention

of letting her think that she was of sufficient importance in Mervyn's eyes to merit discussion with a third person, herself least of any. To suppress the truth was therefore both necessary and politic. "I asked because I saw you dancing outside my house the other day."

"I think I see you at the window, also. You do not look as if you enjoy it. But per'aps you 'ave not the gay disposition. Il y a des gens quelquefois qui manquent ça." The tone of commiseration incensed Virginia. Jackie folded her hands with divine contentment. "But praise to the Saints and Merveen I shall not be obliged to dance any more in the streets for pennies!"

Virginia tried to think of something very cutting. The appropriate words would not come. She was too upset. All this while she had been standing and Jackie sitting. It put her at a disadvantage. All she found herself able to say was: "You seem a very scheming young person."

"What is that word — skeem-ing?" Jackie demanded.

Virginia gave vent to an irascible ejaculation. "I think you understand it well enough! You intend to get on by the help of other people."

Jackie turned the unfriendly words over in an impartial way.

"But yes, it may be. I wish myself to help others continually, so why should not others desire to help me?"

"Would you help Mr. Carter?"

"Ah, more than all!"

There was too much sincerity in the reply for Virginia to doubt it.

"Shall I tell you how you can help him best?"

"Oh" — Jackie leant forward — "but if you would have the goodness!"

"Not by giving him anything," said Virginia slowly. "Rather by taking something away."

Jackie's eyes widened in a puzzled way.

"I mean, by giving him up. By taking *yourself* away. . . . You don't appear to understand. . . . I suppose I must explain. It's very irritating. How old are you?"

"Sixteen — seventeen. I am not sure."

"Then you *ought* to understand. If you were — gentil — a lady, that is —"

"But surely I am *féminine!*"

"Of course you're feminine," cried Virginia impatiently. "But it's not the same thing. *Quite* different, in fact."

"And you? You are a lady, but not *féminine?*"

Jackie's tone was that of a person anxious for information.

"Of course I am. I mean, I'm both." Virginia felt her face getting hot. "And Mr. Carter is a gentleman. He has a position to keep up. He has wealth and education. He moves in the highest society. Now I've told you that, surely you have sense enough to see you are compromising him and that his friends and relations will be irrevocably alienated —"

"Ah! Qu'est-ce que cela signifie — ces mots là?" In her incomprehension of the strange words Jackie did not know she was speaking French.

"Estranged — set against him. They will have nothing more to do with him if he associates — is mixed up with — a girl like yourself."

"Is that the truth you speak, madame?"

"The absolute truth."

Jackie looked her up and down — down and up. A few minutes ago her feelings towards the strange lady had not been unfriendly. She had been so eager to learn from this *élégante* how she could best show her attachment, her love, and her gratitude to her dear Merveen. Now, all her

instincts told her that the counsel she was giving had its roots in some venom whose motive she could not fathom. It was all against the dictates of love and friendship, and it was wrong — all wrong. Indignation seethed within her, but for the moment she kept the lid on her rising wrath.

“Perhaps you would tell me how I injure him in my friendship?” she enquired. “Am I — unpleasant?”

It sounded like a challenge. Virginia had not the courage to meet it squarely. She begged the question.

“Don’t you understand the meaning of class distinctions?” she said, instead. “You are *outrée* — impossible! In manner, in dress, in everything. You are hopeless — a gutter-snipe — *une gavroche!*” *Now* do I make myself plain?”

Jackie jumped to her feet.

“*Une gavroche!*” she vociferated. “Oh, but you make me an insult! *Mon Dieu, c’est trop fort, ça!* I think you do not know my language and you take the wrong word. And also *outrée*. Is it that I am *outrée* because I dress like a *paysanne* — Damn! I can no longer speak English — a *paysanne* with no ’at upon my ’ead? *Ça s’explique facilement!* It is that I ’ave no money to *buy* ’ats. But — *attendez un peu* — one day I shall be *élégante* also. *Ma foi!* more *élégante* than you, *madame*. And you and the others will imitate the fashions I make for myself. . . . I do not wish to stay in the same room with you, *madame*. I do not now believe that you are a friend of my *Merveen*. I would say you are an enemy. I would say you are a bad woman with the tongue to sting. *V’là!*”

The tirade, so unexpected, took Virginia’s breath away. Such vehemence and Gallic ire overwhelmed her.

“You are an atrociously rude girl!” she exclaimed when she could speak. “Are you aware that you are speaking to the Countess of Marlbury?”

This statement had as little effect on Jackie as the name and value of Mervyn's carpet. Moreover, it struck her as an exhibition of snobbery. To indicate how little she thought of it her shoulders made an attempt to reach the ceiling.

"I care nothing for countesses, moi!" she cried derisively. "It is quite possible I may become a countess myself one day. Will you have the goodness to leave me to wait for Merveen, or it is likely that I shall forget myself and throw these cabbages at you."

By the look of her Virginia thought it extremely likely. She began a discreet retirement.

"I do not intend remaining," she said, haughtily. "I have been sufficiently insulted in my brother's house already."

She turned to go.

The colour that had flamed into Jackie's cheeks faded out of them.

"Your brother! Is it possible that you are the sister of Merveen? Oh, madame, I ask pardon! Forgive me!"

She sprang across the room, and before Virginia could guess her intention she had flung her arms round her and kissed her effusively on both cheeks. Physically as well as mentally Virginia was staggered by the affectionate onslaught. Far from being placated by it she felt outraged. She retreated to the door with her hand out to ward off any possible repetition of such odious attentions.

"You horrid creature! How dare you kiss me?" she cried. "The fact that Mr. Carter is my brother is the very reason why I deplore his association with a person like yourself. It has been a dreadful experience to encounter you at all. It shall not occur again, I assure you!"

Jackie watched her go. Her bosom was heaving, her breath coming at a great rate. She felt bursting with

emotion, near to a tempest of tears. She was in an agony of remorse at having been rude to her m'sieur's own sister. She could think of nothing but that. Her conduct was inexcusable. She overlooked the mitigating circumstance of Virginia's slighting attitude towards herself. Virginia's words came back to her. It was almost as though she heard them spoken:

"By giving him up — by taking *yourself* away . . . his friends and relations will become estranged — set against him . . ."

That meant she disgraced him. She was filled with humility and dire regret. Of course it was the truth . . . Who was she to be the little friend of this dear, wonderful m'sieur, this gentleman of position? She might talk of her star, have faith in her future, but after all madame la comtesse was right. She was a person of no distinction or significance — a gutter-snipe — *une gavrochel*!

She caught sight of herself in a full-length mirror at the far end of the room. It reflected the beautiful furniture, the pictures, the many adjuncts of splendour and comfort. And it reflected herself, in her own eyes, the one jarring note within the four walls.

Big tears welled into her eyes. A great sob shook her. A frenzy to act, to efface herself, took hold of her. She rushed to the door, tripping over a cabbage on her way. Cabbages for her Merveen! Now she could see the well-meant but incongruous gift with Virginia's eyes! She despised herself for her ignorance. She must have been *toquée* to bring cabbages to her king. She picked them up, and regardless of passers-by, dropped them out of the window. The flowers could remain as a silent expression of the adoration she was not worthy to lavish upon him — she whose friendship would deprive him of his friends and relations! She would starve rather than do that!

"C'est fini donc," she said to herself miserably.

The conviction that this meant good-bye, a voluntary renunciation of the being whom she revered so highly, was almost too much for her. How could she go without a word of farewell, of thanks? It was impossible!

She sat down at the writing-table, found pen and paper, and wrote through a blinding mist of tears:

Merveen,

I call you this no more. I say adieu. Do not I entreat you come to see me because I cannot bear that on account of myself your friends shall be deprive. From your sister you will hear how I have make the terrible fault and insult her. Pardon me Merveen that I have done this. It trouble me. Not in any way have I deserve the great kindness that I have receive from you. My heart is full of sadness. It was a mistake for you that we should rencounter again.

Je vous remercie mille fois du plaisir et de la joie de vous avoir connu, et même quand je serai vicille, je prierai à Dieu de vous bénir.

Mon étoile ne brille plus.

Jackie

A huge blot combined of ink and tears completed the letter. Jackie laid aside the pen, and, with the nearest approach to a breaking heart that volatile youth can know, effaced herself — as she firmly believed and intended — for ever.

XV

FIVE minutes after she had gone Carter came in, to find her letter, not yet quite dry, upon the blotting-pad. Not having the key to what had inspired it, he was mystified and troubled. The solution lay with Jackie herself. He hurried off to the humble street in Soho where she and Benny lodged. Benny looking very troubled admitted him. His face lightened when he saw Carter. He came out on to the landing, shutting the door, so that he might speak without being overheard. Yes, Jackie was in, shut up in her room. She was in great trouble. She would not speak and she had locked the door. She was crying dreadfully. Benny could say nothing about the cause of her woe. She had started for Carter's flat about two, and had returned in a state of unintelligible grief.

"I've been hoping you'd come," he said. "She won't listen to me. Go right in. Knock at her door, and speak to her yourself, will you, sir?"

Carter followed him in. Through the door of Jackie's room there came the sound of strangled sobs, an unadulterated grief that distressed Carter acutely. He rapped on the panel.

"Jackie!" he called. "I've got your letter, dear. Don't cry. Please open your door and let me see you."

The sobbing ceased. They heard Jackie get up and move across the room. Under the pretence of having some washing up to do on the landing Benny effaced himself.

The key turned in the lock and Jackie stood in the doorway, a picture of woe. She had cried till her eyes and her nose were swollen, till her poor little face was blotched with grief.

Carter had no eyes for anything but herself or in a corner he would have observed a box which now bore but a faint resemblance to the shrine of the day before. The candlesticks had been removed; the flowers were gone. The Virgin and Child still occupied its centre as of yore, but Jackie's piety ended there. She had put St. Anthony into the background *with his face to the wall!* He had taken her in. He was *méchant*, a deceiver; and this was his punishment.

"Oh, Merveen!" she cried. "Why did you come? I 'ave commit the most worse indiscretion! I 'ave been too rude to live!"

Carter took her in his arms.

"My little Jackie," he said soothingly, "I have n't a notion what you're talking about. You were at my flat. Why did you not wait there for me?"

"But yes." Words and sobs fought with one another. "I take there some flowers and cabbages. Your cook admit me. I was so pleased to have conversation with her, to find that she is also French. She give me vases and I arrange my flowers. Then I wait for you in a chair and I fall asleep. When I wake up a lady has arrive into the room — a lady, *très élégante et grande dame*. She speak to me and say that she have know you all her life; and she tell me what I know already, that you are of a great position — almost a prince."

Carter felt perturbed. He was able to make a shrewd guess at the identity of his visitor.

"Don't you believe her," he said playfully. "I'm only an ordinary American citizen, dear little girl, with dollars to waste which my father made for me out of molasses — synthetic molasses — the imitation kind. So there's no glory in the money they made or in the position it's given me. You can cut out the princely imputation. It

does n't go with imitation molasses So it was my sister who's been taking away my character? Don't worry about that. The poor thing can't help it. She belongs to the English aristocracy now and seems to think I'm kind of grafted on to the stock as well. She's quite wrong there. Is that all the trouble?"

"But no, there is immense much more! To begin, how should I know that she is your sister? If I do would I not love her because of it? Instead, I did not think I could like her at all. And when she tell me that I am une gavroche and other bad things that will make all your friends turn their backs on you because of me, I become so outraged that I cannot contain my tongue, and I tell her to go before I throw my cabbages at her. But when she take her 'ook and I am alone again I know that she speak only the truth. I am not a gavroche, but it is true that I am a person of no importance, and therefore not suitable to be the friend of one so distinguished as yourself."

Carter had some difficulty in controlling his amusement. To think of his sedate sister nearly assaulted with cabbages put a strain on his risible faculties.

"Jackie," he said, "do you know that you are hurting my feelings dreadfully?"

She gave an immense, a deplorable sigh.

"My feelings are also 'urt," she rejoined sadly. "I 'ad too much estimation of myself until recently. Now that I 'ave see the great lady your sister I perceive that there is many things for me to learn. It is of no use that I promise myself a lovely house and clothes of elegance, until first I have make control of myself to behave with elegance also."

"That's sound reasoning. But I don't think you're often at fault, dear. I'm sure you were not really rude to my sister. Except perhaps about the cabbages. You

could n't be expected to know how much the English aristocracy — and their American wives — object to raw vegetables. It's really I who ought to apologize to you for my sister's bad manners. I'm afraid the synthetic molasses strain in her blood is responsible for them. It's the only excuse I can think of to account for her want of consideration towards you. Will you be big-hearted enough to try and forget it?"

Jackie raised swimming eyes to his.

"I could forget it all if I could also forget that I may deprive you of your friends. That is what I fear. Even the manner in which I am dressed is sufficient to turn the 'ead round for others to stare and smile. Not in Soho, but in Belgravia. I shall never comport myself with an ease any more in this costume."

"But, my dear child! If it's only a question of clothes we can remedy all that. You shall have new ones. As many as you like. I never thought until now that you've been going about in a kind of fancy-dress. I like you in it, but I shall like you just as much in anything else. You'll need a lot of other things, too. I must send you shopping."

A dubious expression came into Jackie's face. Although the prospect of new and inconspicuous clothes was a delightful one to contemplate, her belief that if she did not cut herself adrift from her m'sieur she would be a detriment to him was so firmly rooted in her mind that she was unable to shake it off all at once.

"Madame your sister would still consider me a gavoche, no matter what I wear," she said mournfully.

Carter sat down and drew her on to his knee. He was acutely anxious to make amends for Virginia's unkindness. To wound the feelings of a child was such a sorry, such a malicious thing to do. And Jackie was only a child.

Virginia's treatment of her was incomprehensible. He took out his handkerchief and wiped away her tears.

"See here, Jackie," he said. "You need n't consider my sister, and you must n't think we're going to be parted because of anything she said. It takes two to make a quarrel and two to decide on a parting. I'm far too fond of you to let you go, and what's more I'm not going to. As for this idea about my friends and relations disapproving of you, it's all moonshine. My friends are not at all like my sister. Quite different in fact. They'll all be kind to you when they know you. Nobody thinks of class distinctions nowadays, except a few like my sister. She got out of molasses and into the peerage and lost her temper in the process. Do you follow me?"

"Parbleu, oui! Comme la mouche dans la m elasse. It make her furious."

"Precisely. She's not accountable for her actions."

After a thoughtful pause Jackie said:

"Merveen, if we continue to be friends would you wish all your friends to know me? Vraiment?"

"Why, of course. It would be a pretty poor sort of friendship if I did n't. I might be a bit selfish and want the biggest share of you, that's all."

She seized his hand and kissed it passionately.

"Oh, Merveen! For you I 'ave the 'eart of a dog. If you call me I must follow. If you whip me I must lick your 'and . . . Tell me, may I spend some of the money you give me for 'ousekeeping to buy a new dress and a 'at?"

"No, I'll give you some more for those things."

"And you will be proud if I make a great effect?"

"Well, it depends," he said mock-seriously. "I shall be if you spend enough. You must make yourself very chic, though." He was immensely relieved at having succeeded in reasoning her out of her unhappiness. To

prevent a relapse he was anxious for her to go without delay and enjoy the delights of shopping, a pursuit as he rightly believed likely to provide one of her sex with the most potent of anodynes against vexation of spirit. "Will you manage with this till I can give you some more?" he asked. "It's all I've got in my pocket."

He handed her some notes, but she would not take half of them. She accepted what seemed to him a quite inadequate sum for her purpose.

"But no more." She pressed the other notes back into his hand. "With this I can buy a 'at and a robe that will make me appear like the latest fashion. You will see."

Her old happy smile flashed out — a smile of gratitude. She tugged at his hand.

"Come, let us go back to the poor Benny. I was too *bouleversée* to tell him why I had so much chagrin. Now it is all over I will relate to him 'ow I 'ave a visit from madame your sister and" — her lips twitched demurely — "and about the cabbages!"

Carter stayed on awhile to make quite sure that she had quite recovered her spirits. He was soon satisfied on that point by the excitable manner in which she tried to describe to Benny the special features of the hat and the cut of the dress she intended purchasing. As most of the technicalities had to be expressed in French his comprehension must have been of the vaguest. But he did not show the slightest impatience. He would have pretended an interest in hairpins, so overjoyed was he to see that she had thrown off her recent dejection.

Carter went home again. His annoyance with Virginia at first prompted him to go and rebuke her for her uncharitable behaviour to Jackie. Then he decided it was not worth while. Jackie was happy once more. All was right with the world. Virginia could rip.

He spent a dreamy hour or two smoking and meditating about his little friend. There were her flowers; so like her in their purity and simplicity, so fresh and sweet, smelling like her. And his thoughts were long, long thoughts. A ring at his front door dispelled them. He resented the disturbance.

But not for long. For the door opened and Jackie herself stood before him. Not the Jackie he knew and loved, but a weird travesty of her. She had on the queerest hat he had ever seen. He did not know it was a cheap imitation of the latest fashion in hats. He did not know that the dress she wore was another example of what her sex, in its determination to be in the mode, will have the temerity to be seen in. She presented an impossible spectacle, a hopeless parody of elegance. All but her face. That wore an expression of complete satisfaction and dazzling happiness.

Instead of trusting to her own taste she had left the selection of her hat and dress to one of the assistants of the cheap drapery shop to which she had taken her custom, and the extravagant effect was the result. The skirt was of exaggerated tightness. She could scarcely walk in it. It was provided with panniers like miniature balloons. Colour and material were both the poorest of post-war substitutes. But what did Jackie care? Her only regret was that Merveen's sister — the wife of a nobleman — was not there to witness her triumph.

"Merveen, Merveen!" she cried excitedly. "I could not wait. I have come immediately from the shop to show you how I have expended the money. And 'ere" — she flourished a brown paper parcel — "is my old skirt, my bodice and my scarf. Will you please to keep it. And sometimes I will wear it for a remembrance, a souvenir. Am I not chic to a degree? Will you not be proud to walk

with me in the Peckadilly and Lestaire Square? Observe me at the back. Take notice of the side of me."

She turned this way and that, demanding admiration.

Carter had not the heart to refuse it. He dreaded undeceiving her. One had only to look into the dear little face and forget the funny fashion in which she was tricked out. His eyes twinkled, but the expression of his mouth was despairingly tender. He put his hands on her shoulders.

"Dear Jackie!" he said. "Dear, incomparable, precious, *funny* little kid!"

XVI

"How pleased Virginia would be if she could see us lunching together like a couple of turtle doves, would n't she?" Irene stirred her coffee thoughtfully. "She's making life a little bed of roses for me just now. You're wise to keep out of the way, dear friend Mervyn. Don't you think it's very forward of me inviting myself like this?"

"I suppose you want something, as usual," he said with a grin. "I'm accustomed to being made a convenience of. Fire away, Renie. I have a favour to ask you myself presently."

"That'll be a bit of a change. You know I'd do almost anything for you except marry you, dear thing."

"That was n't the favour I was going to ask," he jested.

"I'm relieved. Think how disappointed you'd be if I said yes. No one except Virginia would expect a man to fall in love with a person who used to paw him about with jammy fingers, and spoil the creases of his trousers by sitting on his knees."

"Oh, I liked it. You were a nice child. Not stickier than most. Strong-willed and decidedly turbulent, though, in spite of Virginia's disciplinary measures. I was often tempted to steal you out of your nursery and let you give vent to your superabundant energy."

"I wish you had!" she murmured regretfully. "I shall never be a girl again." She became grave. "I suppose you know Virginia has set her heart on our making a match of it?"

"Come to think of it she did mention something of the sort a few days ago," he admitted, a little uncomfortably.

"What did you say?"

"Well, to tell you the truth I hardly knew what to say. I did n't know she had any such a notion in her head. It was rather as if she'd asked me to marry an infant in arms. Fact is, I'd never considered getting married. Moreover, as I told her, I'd no earthly reason for supposing that you cared for me."

"There's no earthly reason why I should n't," considered Irene. "You're a perfect dear."

"Thanks. Same to you."

"But in my case it's 'house full' already. I'm booked up. I'm in love. Have been for ever so long."

"The deuce you have! I mean, I congratulate you, Renie dear. How is it I've heard nothing of it before?"

"That's because you're not much of a clubman." The colour came into her cheeks. "I — I'm getting talked about, Mervyn. Virginia is fearfully upset."

"But why? It's not a crime to be in love."

"No, but I — I've given my heart where I can't give my hand."

She met his eyes across the table, friendly and concerned. Hers were troubled.

"I love John Grandison and he loves me," she said. "It's not just sentimental girl-love. I've had that sort of affairs before. This is the real — the Big Thing — and it's out of my reach. Hard luck, is n't it?"

"I'm awfully sorry," Carter murmured. "But why is it out of your reach?"

She told him and then said:

"So I've had to blight all Virginia's hopes. And now she says I'm the gossip of the cheap press and the ribald crowd." Her lips took on a hard line. "I hate that really,

although I pretend I don't care. I do care. No sensitive — no sensible girl likes to fly in the face of the world's opinion. It's specially hard when you don't deserve the cruel things people say. It cuts Grandison too."

Carter nodded sympathetically and waited for her to continue. He guessed there was more to come.

"So Virginia wants to give the lie to all this gossip by announcing our engagement — yours and mine. She says it's so suitable. Is n't it a dreadful word? When anything is spoken of as being suitable, you may depend upon it it's just not — from a dress to matrimony . . . But what I want to ask you is this. Would you mind — just until people have discovered some one else to stick pins into and throw stones at — would you mind being seen about with me? Only to give people the impression that we *might* be going to get engaged any old time? It would make Virginia think so, too. Is it dreadful of me to make such a convenience of you? You're not cross?"

"Not a bit. In fact, I feel flattered. You know I'm awfully fond of you, Renie. If you think it will do any good — stop scandal about you and Grandison — of course you can make use of me."

She laid her hand on his gratefully.

"Best of pals, bless you!" she said.

After a short but thoughtful silence Carter said:

"But — Grandison? Are you going on seeing him? . . . It's hardly wise, is it?"

"It's got to go on," she replied in a low voice. "I could n't give him up. He cares too much. I think it would kill us both to lose each other. I can't talk about it, Mervyn. It goes too deep."

He understood. Love came to every one just like that. Once in a lifetime, perhaps. Why should Irene

give up the man she loved? Could he give up his little Jackie? . . .

"Now, what is it you want me to do for you?" Irene asked presently. "We might make it a mutual-aid society."

With much deliberation Carter lit a cigarette. Then he looked at her, weighing the question he was about to put.

"Yes, you can trust me," intuition made her say.

"Have you heard of Jacqueline?" he asked.

"You mean Jackie? Yes, I have. From Virginia. She's got some queer story about an organ-grinder's daughter whom you're interested in. She was dancing outside our house one day last week, was n't she? And Virginia found her yesterday in your flat and there was a front scene? She says she's a minx. I'd love to see her."

"Out of curiosity?"

"Not altogether. From the way Virginia talked I gathered she must be some child!"

"She is. I want you to know her. That's what I was going to ask you. I want Jackie and you to meet. I want you to be awfully kind to her to make up for Virginia's unkindness."

"Why, of course I will. But is that all?"

"Not quite. She's French, and very young for her age. Until the other day she had only a sort of fancy dancing dress to go about in, and after her encounter with Virginia, who must have been very personal regarding her appearance, she was sensitive about it. So I gave her some money to get everyday clothes. She would only take five pounds."

"And of course she got the wrong things?"

"Yes. She does n't know they're all wrong, though. I simply could n't tell her the truth. She was so delighted with herself and wanted me to be pleased. She needs

somebody like you to show her how to dress. Will you, to oblige me, take on the job?"

"I should love to! Is she pretty?"

"I think you'll admire her," said Carter. "You'll have to admit she's inimitable."

"Well, give me her address and I'll go and see her now. I've nothing to do this afternoon."

Thanking her profusely, Carter wrote out the address and then filled in a cheque. Irene's eyebrows went up when she saw the amount for which it was drawn.

"Am I to spend all this?" she asked in surprise.

"More if you like. I know clothes are a fabulous price just now."

"What a joy it must be not to care what one spends!" She put the cheque in her bag. "Your Jackie is lucky in having a millionaire for a friend. Tell me more about her, Mervyn. Are you in love with her?"

Carter looked at her reflectively when he answered:

"I'm bewitched. You'll understand when you see her."

"You've made me awfully curious, Mervyn. I'm dying to see her. I'll go right away."

Late that afternoon Carter was called to the telephone. The speaker was Irene. She had been shopping with Jackie since lunch-time and had only just got back. And Jackie? Oh, Jackie was absolutely delightful!

"I'm in love with her if you're not," she declared. "I'm bewitched too. I went back and had tea with her and that adopted cripple of hers. She's wonderful! She's not like any other girl I've ever come across. I've called you up to tell you to meet her at the Carlton at eight to-night. You're dining with a Fairy Princess. Book a table for two."

Carter's gratification was somewhat qualified by Irene's concluding words. She had been a brick to take Jackie in hand. It was delightful to know that she approved of her. Her enthusiasm was immensely comforting after Virginia's treatment of the girl. But to be ordered at short notice to dine with Jackie in a fashionable restaurant put him in a dilemma. Her ways were not the ways of the people who frequented the Carlton. She was quite ignorant of the customs and conventions of polite society. He very much doubted whether she would like being plunged into such a *milieu*, or derive any pleasure from it. It was a wild idea of Irene's.

Still, the arrangement being made and there being no time to cancel it, Carter had no alternative but to fall in with it. After reserving a table by telephone he had just time to dress and get to the Carlton by eight o'clock. He took a seat in the Palm Court near the entrance doors, with just the faintest degree of anxiety lest Jackie should turn up in the wrong costume. He supposed she would wear a skirt and blouse. He hoped it would be a dark skirt and a plain blouse. White for choice.

She was late. Not until twenty minutes past the hour did she make her appearance, and then he had to look and look before he was sure it was she. In intense admiration, some awe, and with a beating heart he went to meet her. And as he did so his idyllic affection for the little girl of yesterday underwent a miraculous change. A new and mightier emotion stirred him. For the first time in his life he knew what love was — love for a woman — love for Jacqueline.

She was another being; perfect to look on, exquisitely dressed; so beautiful, so much more like a lovely flower than a creature of flesh and blood, that her effect on Carter's eyes and feelings was one of entrancement. He was

almost impelled to kneel at her feet, to kiss the hem of the rose-shot, mist-like frock that showed beneath the folds of her feather-trimmed wrap of soft brocade.

Irene, herself initiate, had taken Jackie and led her into her woman's kingdom, to the very steps of her throne . . .

XVII

ACROSS their table in the restaurant Jackie gave Carter a smile of transport. She was enchanted by the music and the glitter: all the amenities of luxury. She felt as if she were in fairyland. Everything seemed too good to be true. She and her frock were the admiration of everybody within view. That alone was a delicious sensation. She would not have been a true daughter of Eve had she not been glad to observe it. But the acme of her delight lay in the glory she derived from making a public *début* with her fairy prince.

She behaved without the slightest trace of self-consciousness. Novel as she found the situation she took it as one to the manner born, showing only the honest enjoyment of a well-bred girl at her first dinner party.

"Oh, Merveen!" she murmured, "I am so full of happiness. My feet dance underneath the table. Am I to your satisfaction? Pardon that I keep on looking in the glass. I do not recognize myself. I am a trans — a transgression. No, I mean a traduction!"

"Are you?" he made answer. "I should call you an adaptation; an example of progressive modification." He lowered his voice tenderly. "Jackie, you're a rosebud that has come out in the night! Do you know you've taken my breath away! Bowled me clean over! What have you done to yourself?"

"I? But nothing. It is that wonderful Irene and all the clothes she has made choice of. All that you see, Merveen, is the glamour of Monsieur Poiret of the robes and modes shop — not of Jackie. Is not this a beautiful confection?" She lovingly fingered the tulle folds of her

frock. "It is difficult to imagine how that your sister should have call me une gavroche! If only she could see me at this moment! Merveen, I am all-complete! Would you believe that even my lingerie is of silk? Six of this, six of that, and twelve pair of stocking! And yesterday, I had only two pair and one beyond the mend! How can I give you thanks enough?"

"By keeping on looking as sweet as you do now, and by justifying yourself all along the line."

"How you mean?"

"By aspiring to the heights. By fulfilling your destiny. By making good. I've fixed up an appointment for you with Audagna. You're to go to him to-morrow morning. I was half afraid he would n't see you. He talks of retiring. He says he's too tired and too old to teach any longer, and he has plenty of money. Still, I prevailed on him in the end, I'm glad to say."

"And the price, Merveen? The price of these lessons will be mints of gold, is it not?"

Carter waved that aside. "Don't bother your head about that," he said. "The money's nothing."

Jackie grew thoughtful. Something was troubling her.

"Will you promise not to be offend at something I would say?" she asked at last.

"Sure."

"It is this: I do not want these dancing lessons."

"But I thought you'd set your heart and soul on them!"

"Yes, but there is something else. For two nights I consider. Merveen, 'ow can I learn to dance with a 'appy 'eart while the poor Benny is always in pain of the back? It would be — égoiste. Think well. For so many years he has suffer, not a little from now to then, but always. In the morning it is the worst. He will get up early before myself to accustom himself to the pain, in order that he is

able to bear it before my eyes. So I have said to myself that if I abandon these lessons perhaps Merveen will give me instead the money for a great doctor. If we wait till I am become famous the pain may kill Benny in the meantime. Imagine, Merveen! a life that is all suffering! It is a thought to make one weep."

Carter patted her hand.

"I've not forgotten Benny," he said. "After I'd seen Audagna I went on to Purton Day. He's the great spine doctor. We're going to take Benny to see him next week. But there's no reason why you should give up your dancing lessons, Jackie. I should help Benny in any case, if for no other reason than that he's a countryman of mine."

"But, Merveen, always, always, it is the charity!"

"You must n't think that, Jackie. Do you know, before I met you and you danced the heart out of me, I had no other hobby in the world but collecting fiddles? Bits of dead wood! I could n't even play them! It was just a craze — a useless one. Having nothing to do and all day to do it in is the trouble. You find that difficult to understand, I suppose? It's true, though; and if you think it over you'll get to know why I feel far more under an obligation to you than you can ever be to me. You've taught me a lot lately, dear. You've given me a new interest in life. I can't tell you quite how it's come about, but there it is. You've switched me off fiddle collecting — the unessential; and made me see that the secret of happiness is to do a little real good by helping others."

"But how can I make you see that? I, who can help nobody?"

"Why, you're helping all the time. With all you've got — with yourself, the most precious of gifts. You give out love and wholesomeness and joy and beauty all the time. You're a perfume, a breath of heaven, Jackie."

She flushed with pleasure which was half amazement.

"Oh, Merveen," she chided softly, "you make me 'ave a conceit of myself. I do not understand why I should make you feel so incline to give."

"Don't you? Well, you have and you do. You get me that way, that's all there is to it." He spoke lightly to cover his feelings. "Shall I tell you what I did the day before yesterday? Those violins I'd collected sort of got talking to me — a dozen of them together worth enough to endow a hospital or build a church — all in show-cases just to look at. No use to any one. And suddenly I saw what a fool I was. So now, at this very moment, there's a poor devil of a violinist in a cheap restaurant playing like a happy angel on a Strad; a street musician of parts has another; and I'm looking out for owners for the rest. It's all your doing, Jackie. Guess I was blind until you happened along. Now I'm nearer true happiness than I ever thought possible, thanks to you. My ship has come home. And yours is in the offing. We're going to row out to meet it, and take Benny with us for the good of his health." Carter looked at his watch. "But that's all for to-morrow. What would you like to do this evening? I think I'll take you to see Caliewska at the Coliseum. What do you say?"

Jackie clasped her hands in delight.

"Oh, Merveen! That incomparable one! Only on the billposts have I see her." She pushed her chair back impetuously. "Shall we go immediately?"

"We shall be on time," he smiled as he got up.

To sit in a stage-box and watch Caliewska was nearly as great a joy to Carter as it was to Jackie. But his artistic perceptions were outstripped by her practical knowledge of the great dancer's art. The wondrous technique of the Russian fairy stirred her to her depths.

From the moment the ballet commenced she had not a word to say. *This* was her world, the one behind the glowing footlights. She had never been in a big theatre before. She marvelled at the beauty and vastness of the building and the prodigious audience. She was stirred by emotions that no ordinary theatre-goer could have felt. In her eyes a theatre like this was a cathedral, a temple of Art. It aroused in her an indefinable longing to kneel down and give praise. But the audience were not praying. They were there only for amusement. The great art of Caliowska, which had taken almost every hour of her life to acquire, was to be witnessed here merely as an after-dinner diversion.

Carter, observing her enraptured face, made no attempt at conversation. He divined something of the feelings that stirred her. Words would have dissipated them, broken the spell.

While the orchestra played Jackie sat in a dream. Mentally she was not in the front of the house at all. Imagination took her behind. She was Caliowska herself — Caliowska waiting for the curtain to go up, ready to trip on to the stage. But when the divine Russian, light as thistledown, flitted into view, she woke from her illusion. Caliowska transcended anything she had ever thought possible. Never in the world could Jackie expect to reach such heights of artistry. Into the dance tragedy unfolding before her eyes Caliowska poured out soul and spirit. It was more than wonderful. It was seraphic. She forgot that what she saw was a woman dancing, a being of flesh and blood with a heart and body like her own. Caliowska seemed a creature of another world. Her grace and beauty were supreme. Her technique seemed too perfect to be the achievement of a human being.

Only when the curtain fell did Jackie take her eyes from

the stage. Throughout the ballet she had sat without movement, holding her breath . . . And when the curtain swung up again, and Caliorska took call after call, a sudden sob shook her. Her own dancing was nothing — nothing! She was a worm, a creeping thing of the earth, without feet!

“Did you enjoy it?” Carter enquired.

She could not speak. The sobs had to be swallowed back first.

“Would you like to see Caliorska? Just for a minute in her dressing-room?”

She could only nod. She was ready to worship at Caliorska’s feet.

Carter had met the dancer at Virginia’s house. Society’s doors, which she cared not a whit about, were all open to her. His card, pencilled with a message requesting her to see a friend of his, was quite sufficient to obtain an interview for Jackie. An attendant took her round to the back of the theatre.

Caliowska had already removed the grease-paint from her face and was reclining on a sofa, waiting for her ballet shoes to be untied. Her dresser was about to do this when Jackie came into the room.

“Oh, madame, permit me!” she cried, running forward. “May I not take them off?”

Caliowska motioned the dresser away. A little smile came into her tired, white face. Behind the scenes, after her work, she was the frailest creature. She was like an exhausted bird that has flown too long and too far. From the auditorium one saw only the supreme expression of a wonderful art, the spirit of Caliorska triumphing over the limitations of the flesh; behind the scenes one became aware of the price she nightly paid for that triumph.

Jackie knelt by the sofa. Artistically, she did not feel

herself worthy to touch the silken ribbon of Caliovska's ballet shoes. Carefully, humbly, she took them off — the thin satin shoes which were worn out after each night's performance. The toe-tips were slightly blood-stained. Every night of her dancing life Caliovska's beautiful feet bled. It was an infliction to which she had long become inured. But the evidence of it brought a pang to Jackie's heart.

Caliovska's weary eyes, which glowed like a lamp from the soul within when she danced, rested on Jackie with gentle and friendly interest. On his card Carter had mentioned that she was about to commence serious training as a dancer.

In a soft voice, a little halting from recent exertion, speaking in French, Caliovska commenced to counsel and advise. As one whose training had begun at the age of eight she spoke of the dancer's education, demonstrating by her own experience that there was no short-cut to success, no royal road to fame, and that attainment could be achieved only by ceaseless perseverance. She made it clear that in the dancer's art supremest expression of it could be bought only at the expense of pain.

"Never grudge to yourself pain of any kind," she said. "Pain of the body, of the mind. It is all one, a discipline, an education. And to dance well, little one, there is only one way — continued discipline, long practice." She looked steadily into Jackie's eyes. "Have you the spirit and the courage?"

She saw the courage in them, but also something else. Again and yet again love would try to woo this girl away from art, and both she could not have. She dwelt on this. Always, for everything, one had to pay the price . . . Neither woman nor man could serve two masters.

Jackie assured her that her choice of service was al-

ready made. Never before in her life had she felt so humble as she did in the presence of this spirit-pale woman who made her realize how very, very far she had yet to go.

Caliowska bade her adieu, kissing her lightly on the forehead. She called her "little sister in art"; and Jackie, thrilled by the *accueil*, registered an inward vow to be worthy of such a sisterhood.

On her way to the door she picked up one of the ballet shoes and regarded it wistfully.

"Oh, madame!" she said timorously. "If I might have this to regard . . . to remember . . . to keep myself in humility . . . ?"

"It is fit only to throw away," was the rejoinder.

But Jackie took it gratefully, to treasure all her life.

She was very quiet when she rejoined Carter, too moved by the evening's rare experience to want to talk. Even her dear Merveen, benefactor and prince, seemed to have become a little remote, less personal to her. Caliowska's spell was upon her, and beneath her theatre-wrap, pressed tightly to her heart, she clasped the little dancing shoe . . . the souvenir of pain.

XVIII

A. B. CALDERON (generally known as "A.B.C." in theatrical circles) sprang two steps at a time up the stairs of Audagna's premises in Leicester Square, hurried along a passage, threw open the door of a room, stopped for an instant to look at a girl waiting there, crossed to another door that led to Audagna's office, darted at the ballet-master, and wrung his hand energetically.

Entrepreneur, theatre-owner, boxing-contest promoter, foremost hustler of his profession, he had no time to waste. He did everything on the run.

"Audagna, you're the one man who can help me!" he burst out. "I'm in a hole! You know I'm opening the Diplomats' Theatre on the fourteenth with 'Spatch-Cock.'"

"The new revue?" queried Audagna.

"Yes. Well, I engaged Claudia Day to play Mariette, the lead. Unfortunately, it's more of a dancing part than anything else."

"That big heavy Claudia to dance! That elephant!" Audagna heaved up his shoulders and then shuddered. "And so, despairing, you come to me to get her dancing into shape? A.B.C., I am your friend, but I am not a circus trainer. Moreover, I am about to give up business. I retire."

"Hold on a bit, Audagna. I'm not asking you to teach her. I own I made a colossal mistake in taking her on. She was n't my fancy, I assure you. I engaged her to oblige one of my backers who was keen on her having the part. But she's hopeless. She's got less temperament than a suet pudding, and her voice is like a raven's. And

every day she's getting fatter. The long and the short of it is, I fired her yesterday, told her backer to go to the devil and take his money out of the show if he likes, and here I am! Now I want the right girl for the part, and if I'm not very much mistaken she's in the next room at this very moment. I want you to tell me who she is, what she's done, and whether I can give her a trial.

"But who is there in the next room?" demanded Audagna, blankly.

"A girl. A dark girl with wonderful eyes. And young. She was practising dance steps. 'Pon my soul I nearly put her through her paces right away, but I thought I'd better ask you about her first. You *must* know who she is, my dear old boy. Has n't she got an appointment with you?"

Audagna clapped his hands to his head, cudgelling his brains. A defective memory was his besetting weakness. He would make engagements and appointments without noting them down, and then forget all about them. Those who knew him were aware of this failing and made allowances for it.

But Jackie, in the next room waiting for her long-looked-for interview, was getting impatient and restless. At Carter's request she had arrived at ten-thirty. It was now past eleven. She supposed that the great ballet-master must have been awaiting the alert-looking man who had passed through the room a few minutes ago. She was still trying to possess her soul in patience when Audagna opened the door a few inches and peered at her curiously. Behind him was the alert-looking man.

"Mademoiselle," said the former, "have you been waiting to see me? Will you have the goodness to say what for you have come? My recollection is out of order."

"I come to dance to you," Jackie answered, diffidently.

"Monsieur Merveen Carter made for me an appointment. Have I come at the wrong hour?"

Carter's name awakened Audagna's stagnant memory.

"O cielo! I forget!" he cried. "But no matter. You shall dance now — immediately. This way. You will also come?" he asked Calderon.

Calderon had every intention of doing so. One glance at Jackie had been almost sufficient for him. He had an extraordinary *flair* for discovering talent. He was convinced that this girl had it.

With pulses at high pressure Jackie followed Audagna into his practice-room. Calderon noted the way she walked. She moved gracefully, like a Spaniard, from the hips. Her poise was perfect. All the previous afternoon he had been scouring the theatrical agencies on the lookout for an actress to replace Claudia Day. He had interviewed stars of greater and lesser magnitude and he had seen no one as promising as this unknown girl. He was all agog to see her dance.

At its farther end the room had a raised platform about the size of an average stage. At one side of it stood a piano. Audagna sat down and played the opening bars of Mendelssohn's "Spring Song."

"Can you dance to this?" he asked.

Jackie listened for a minute or two.

"If you play while I undress I will learn it," she said, and with Calderon's assistance mounted the stage where, with her attention concentrated on the music, she slipped off her frock and shoes. Under the former was a pleated dancing skirt; the latter were replaced by a pair of ballet shoes brought for the purpose.

By this time Audagna had come to the end of the movement. Jackie took up a position at the back of the platform.

"Allez," she said.

She swayed to the prelude as he recommenced, and sharp on the first note of the dance music broke into a measure so airy and so perfectly in accord with its rhythm that her audience of two at once assumed it to be the result of long study and practice. But the effect was one which Jackie always created on beholders. Her grace compelled it. Instinctively she converted music into terms of movement. She danced to this melody of spring-time and laughing things without conscious effort. Like gossamer she fitted to its phrases, quite unaware that every now and then her feet were reproducing the masterly steps of Calowska herself. With Calowska's shoe beneath her pillow she had slept and dreamt and imbibed some of the wearer's essence.

Calderon could not take his eyes off her. For once in a way all thought of business went out of his head. The sheer pleasure of watching this joyous creature sufficed him. Her dancing was not supreme art: far from it; but it was so natural, so unaffectedly happy. It made him feel young again just to look at her.

All the while, Audagna, who hardly ever allowed a pupil to dance through four bars of music uncorrected, said not a word. He was nodding and smiling, observing every movement of her nimble feet, noting also that she danced with her head, her arms, and her hands. He recognized every one of her limitations, but he did not underestimate any of her merits. He knew her for what she was — that rare thing, a dancer born.

The music stopped, and Jackie, now still, stood modestly before the two men, a little bashful, a little afraid. That other one — the alert-looking, younger man — did not matter. His opinion was nothing to her. But if Audagna had not liked her dancing! If she was not good enough for him to accept as a pupil!

But Audagna quickly disposed of that fear. Agile in spite of his years and his white hair, he vaulted on to the stage, took her face between his two hands and kissed it.

"Little daughter of the Muses, I love you!" he cried.

There was no mistaking his meaning. She trembled with excitement.

"Then, monsieur . . . you will teach me?"

Once again he kissed her. Audagna's memory might be defective, but his enthusiasms were unimpaired. This little one would be the last pupil of his old age, his best-beloved dancing child!

"Tell the signor — tell Mr. Carter," he said, "that he has given me joy to see you dance. Tell him, yes, that I teach you with a great, great felicity. But not for money! No, for the pleasure. It is for my own gratification that I would accept you as my last pupil."

Calderon could curb his impatience no longer. He joined them on the stage.

"Splendid! Splendid!" he cried.

Audagna's praise had rendered Jackie temporarily speechless. Calderon saw the tears in her eyes and the quivering of her lips. Undoubtedly the girl was a genius in her way, an artist ingrain. Technique would perfect her, of course; but he was not sure that he did not prefer her as she was. Her individuality was outstanding. She had that elusive quality which never fails to get over the footlights, a wonderful magnetism. She had youth, charm, grace, and temperament. He was convinced of the last. She might be worth more than her weight in gold. Unlike Audagna, who was a queer old creature of impulse and generosity, Calderon could not help thinking of her commercial value. As a speculation she was immensely attractive. He began estimating what she would be worth to him in her present immature state: what she might not

be worth later on. There imagination ran away with him. In any case she was the equivalent of shares standing at a heavy discount, but which bid fair to go to an incredible premium.

Over and above all she was the Mariette of his revue to the life. He meant to make of the piece something more than a mere hotchpot of gorgeous scenery and stage tricks. There was good music in it, a plot, a fine acting part for the girl who would play Mariette. He thanked his stars that he had consigned Claudia Day's backer to the deuce, and "fired" Claudia as well. She was mature, a clod, of the earth earthy; whereas this other, whose name he did not even yet know, was young, ethereal, and clever — clever as paint! He was ready to stake his managerial reputation on it. She was a first-prize find! She was *the goods!* It was his business in life to recognize and deliver them.

"If you're in an engagement, mademoiselle," he said, taking the bull by the horns: "if you're committed to any contracts, I'm willing to pay you to break any and all of them . . . Audagna, dear old boy, will you allow me to talk business?"

XIX

JACKIE and Benny had moved house. With much tact, aided and abetted by Irene, Carter had succeeded in installing them in a pretty, furnished flat in Green Street, Mayfair. Jackie, engaged by Calderon to play Mariette in his revue at a commencing salary which was munificence in her eyes, firmly believed that she was paying a rent of six guineas a week. Carter did not disillusion her. It made her so happy to think that she was self-supporting. She revelled in her new home, in all the wonderful things that seemed to have come about in a single stroke of fortune's wand.

Here she was, just Jackie, in a beautiful *appartement* such as rich people inhabited; possessing frocks innumerable; the little friend of the dearest and most wonderful m'sieur in the world; pupil of the great Audagna, who actually taught her for love; engaged by the greatest impresario in London to play a considerable part in a West End production! It was incredible! It was wonderful! Always she was realizing her good fortune, and feeling amazingly thankful for it.

Her whole world seemed full of friends and beneficent forces. There was Benny shortly about to undergo treatment that would very likely cure him. That in itself was enough to make her heart sing. Her cup of joy was brimming over. She felt in love with all the world.

She had just finished arranging the table for tea with housewifely enjoyment; for Carter and Irene were coming. Benny lay on a couch. He had been very quiet all day. On the morrow he was going to Sir Purton Day's nursing home to undergo treatment prior to the operation

that might cure him. The specialist had pronounced a distinct chance of a complete cure, but his qualification had been that there must be no delay. Too much time had been lost already.

Jackie touched Benny's cheek with light, caressing fingers.

"But smile, chéri," she urged.

The effort that Benny made to obey her was a poor one.

"I know I ought n't to be such a dull dog," he said. "I've everything in the world to be thankful for, but somehow since we've been here I've had a feeling that it's all a dream. I shall wake up presently and find I'm back with Bowman, and that you never existed at all. Jackie, it *can't* last. It's all too good to be true!"

"It is your infirmity that make you think that," she rejoined tenderly. "When you are returned from the home all that will be altered. You will then say that it is the bad things that are too bad to be true. Is the back aching? Soon that will be of the past. Is it that you have the funk? But that is childish. I might also have the funk that I shall make a failure of myself as Mariette. God would not be good if he permit such a fiasco; and surely you would not doubt the goodness of God. Let us make a total of all the *bénéfices* we have already received." She raised spread fingers and pulled one down. "Un — we have escape from the bad Bowman; deux — we inhabit Belgravia — no, Mayfair — with window-boxes of flowers and a brass knocker like a face even as I predict, only much sooner has it arrive; trois — you will have a cure of your back; quatre — if I am a success my name will be in electric light outside the theatre like stars shining. Monsieur Calderon have promise so. Oh, but, I cannot count all the blessings. So make a cheer-up, chéri, and pull at yourself."

But she could not banish his dejection. Usually Benny kept his dark moods to himself. He knew it was not fair to cloud Jackie's happiness, especially at a time like this when she was rehearsing and practising all day at the theatre and also at Audagna's. She had only had a fortnight's rehearsals. To-morrow night she was to make her first appearance in public. By the merest hazard, her chance had come at the very outset of her career — one of those lucky chances which occasionally happen in stageland. It was far too good a one to take lightly. Carter had said so when she triumphantly waved her amazing contract before his surprised eyes. Audagna had strongly advised her to accept Calderon's offer and terms. Calderon was about the only manager in London who would have had the courage to put on a young and untried girl in a first-class production. It was his boast that he had never yet backed a loser; and he would have put his last shirt on Jackie. She was so divinely fresh. She had n't a single trick of the trade. She would be like a breath of ozone to a jaded public if she did n't get stage fright. Nor did he believe she would be spoilt by success, or her progress impeded by undue conceit of herself. He had never come across any one quite so refreshingly anxious to learn, so extremely receptive. She appreciated with the utmost humility the great gulf that divided her art from the art of Caliwaska, for instance. The ballet shoe which she treasured as a priceless souvenir was sufficient reminder of heights to which she could never attain. In a sense, although she believed in her star with superstitious tenacity, she was extraordinarily humble concerning her talents. Above all, she was quite unaware of the magnetic quality of her beauty. Carter and Benny knew its potency, but they kept the knowledge locked in their hearts. Calderon hugged it as a sort of trade secret that would be

put to the test when "Spatch-Cock" was presented to a revue-crazy world.

The only cloud in Jackie's sky was when, as now, her Benny, her broken doll, looked depressed. She was most desperately anxious for all the world to be happy, especially all those of her nearer world. Happiness with her was a creed. Joy was the *raison d'être* of her life.

A little shamefacedly Benny turned his head away so that she should not see the tears in his eyes.

"Is it the funk that is troubling you?" she persisted sympathetically.

"Not altogether. All day I've felt like two cents. For two nights I've dreamt of Bowman. I dreamt he'd tracked us here and was smashing up everything in the place. I've always got a feeling at the back of my mind that one day he'll turn up and raise Cain. D' you think if he knew of your good luck and my chance of getting well that he would n't take a devil's own joy in spoiling our prospects? He'd accuse me of murder and you of being my accomplice. I don't say he'd make it a police matter, but he'd put the screw on us. Trust him for that! And in another dream I had he was burning my back with a red-hot poker and then laughing at the sport. I can't shake off the feeling that something bad 's going to happen. Good luck only runs in streaks. It's too much to expect it to last all the time. Sometimes when you've been at the theatre and I've had nothing else to do but lie and think, I've seen him coming in at that door almost as plain as life, and carting me off then and there . . . And I've imagined you coming back to find me gone."

"But chéri," she soothed, "think of the weeks that have gone by! He has forgotten us."

"Not he. If he has n't turned up it's not for want of

looking. I know the brute all through! He'll never forget or forgive; he'll wait years to pay back a grudge. Did I ever tell you about the kitten that scratched him in play? Such a pretty little thing it was. It belonged to a kiddie in one of our diggings. Well, one day it scratched him accidentally, and he got into one of his mad rages. No, he did n't kill it right off. That was too merciful for him. It just disappeared, and the kiddie cried her eyes out. But just before we left, it turned up. The fiend had tortured it so that it had lived on in agony for days. He pretended he did n't know anything about it. But I guessed . . . I could tell by the way he looked, and the sympathy he pretended to feel — he who had n't a grain of mercy in him!" He clasped Jackie's hand tightly. "Jackie! I'm an awful coward whenever I think of him! If he got me — if he took me — I'd far sooner be dead than live to be tortured like that kitten. You don't know what I've been through all these years. I've never told you half . . ."

Jackie put her arms round his shrinking form. She could not comprehend his sudden fear that Bowman might find them. It seemed the remotest of all possibilities. But her heart went out to Benny in love and sympathy nevertheless. She coaxed and comforted him. The intensely maternal side of her nature was only shown to Benny. No one else, except perhaps the inanimate broken doll of her childhood, had ever glimpsed it.

In the end her sweet cajoleries had effect, and after an ineffectual attempt to explain away his black mood he cheered up. It is not always easy to account for the overwhelming sense of approaching evil which a highly strung nature can experience. Jackie, whose tears were only for the moment, whose optimism would most likely have survived the shipwreck of life and hope itself, was never

intuitive of evil, because she never anticipated anything else but good.

"Vlan!" she cried as a burst of music suddenly filled the street below. "I will dance to cheer you like I dance to Sassoni's organ. Mais!" — she was at the window — "it is Sassoni himself with his monkey recovered, and his wife! And they have a baby, so small, in a basket tied on at the side! Dame! I must hold it in my arms. I will go to bring them up immediately."

"Oh, Jackie, don't —" Benny began.

But Jackie tore downstairs. A few minutes later she returned with the entire family — Sassoni with his earrings and untrustworthy smile, his wife, and the baby, whom Jackie had taken proud possession of.

She lost her head completely over the baby. She had never before held one so young and so small in her arms. Like most Italian babies this one was really pretty, and so helpless and brown. She regaled her guests with cake and wine. She explained to Sassoni the circumstances that had caused her to play truant. Then she went into fresh raptures over the baby. She would have given all the dresses in her wardrobe to possess one like it.

"Oh, le petit poupon!" she cried. "Will you not make me a borrow of it to keep for a little while? See, the little hands, Benny! Is it not divine? Shall I ever have one — un tel mignon? If I ask Merveen would he purchase me one, perhaps?"

Sassoni, draining his glass, pricked up his ears at the word "purchase," and his eyes gleamed. Did Jackie wish to purchase a child? They might perhaps spare this one. It could doubtless be arranged. There were four at home already and of a surety more to come.

But Sassoni's wife quashed any bargaining.

"The good God send them!" she ejaculated piously.

"Pietro, thou wouldst sell thy grandmother for two soldi!" Which was not far from the truth.

The party left considerably the richer for the meeting. Jackie bestowed a silk skirt upon the baby to make it a robe, and produced a Liberty shawl to adorn the ample shoulders of Sassoni's wife; for the family in general she filled a basket with all the good things she could spare from her tea-table; last of all she gave Sassoni a pound note for himself. Then she stood at the window leaning out and blowing kisses to the baby.

"Is she a princess, that little one?" asked the organ-grinder's wife. She knew little English, no French at all, and therefore had understood very little of the conversation.

Sassoni spat. Had she no eyes in her head to recognize the nichilità who had taken the place of his monkey when it fell sick and then deserted him without notice? What she was doing in a palazzo, though, was beyond him.

"Come si voglia," said the woman, "she is good and beautiful enough for a princess. This shawl has cost much money and this skirt for our bambino is trimmed with real lace — maraviglioso!" Gratefully she invoked the saints on the donor's behalf.

Sassoni brought his organ to a standstill before a post-office.

"Where goest thou?" she asked.

Sassoni did not deign to answer. Wives were meant to help drag barrel-organs and bear children, not to ask questions.

He swung into the post-office and with much licking of the stump of a pencil, laboriously wrote out a telegram. It was addressed to *Bowman, Actors' Touring Club, Strand.*

XX

VIRGINIA was looking through the morning papers. Her name figured in several. She did not court publicity, but the great and the unduly rich sometimes find it difficult to escape its fierce light. One of the paragraphs described the opening of a new wing of a hospital at which she had presided; another referred to her presence at the opera in the company of certain foreign Royal Highnesses. In this her dress and the lustre of the Marlbury pearls were described at greater length than the jewels and the apparel of the Princess. The comparison was not disagreeable to Virginia. In the "Daily Mail" she read of the dress rehearsal of "Spatch-Cock." It heralded the appearance of a new theatrical star, an exceptional dancer with a spontaneous style of her own who also showed dramatic abilities of a high order. The writer dubbed her "The Soul of Dance." She was French; her name was Jacqueline de Brie; she was the discovery of that most acute of managers, Mr. A. B. Calderon; it was rumoured that her engagement to a certain young American millionaire resident in London would shortly be announced.

The latter statement incensed Virginia. She had never heard "the creature's" surname before, but she was sure it was Jackie's, the *gavroche* who polluted Persian carpets with cabbages and who had insulted her so outrageously in Mervyn's flat. She also took it for granted that Mervyn was to blame for the sudden and unexpected publicity given to the French girl. Money, of course, could pitchfork a person of no merit into notoriety, especially on the stage. She fervently hoped that the notoriety in this case

would be a brief one. That this "Jackie" — vulgar name — could possess any real talent she did not believe. Still, she decided she would go and see "Spatch-Cock" for herself in spite of her dislike of the frivolities of revue.

She threw the paper petulantly from her and picked up another. A name in the first column of the page at which she had opened it caught her eye. She seemed fated to-day to come across antipathetic names:

On the 30th ult. at a nursing home, Olive, wife of John Grandison, R.A. R.I.P.

Before Virginia's mind could quite grasp the significance of this announcement, she descried the same name in another column headed "Honours List":

Mr. John Grandison, R.A., the eminent portrait painter, heads the list of the new Baronetcies.

A paragraph followed, extolling the recipient's services to Art. It was not quite as long as the one allotted to her opera dress and the Marlbury pearls, so she almost forgave it. But the concatenation of circumstances greatly exercised her mind. Grandison unexpectedly a widower and a baronet! It meant that if Irene still insisted on marrying him she would not be contracting an absolute misalliance. The prefix "Honourable" to her married title would at least distinguish it from those lavished so prodigally on the New Rich. Mercifully, too, Irene had not of late been the subject of undue gossip. Her constant appearances in the company of Mervyn had rehabilitated her reputation in public esteem. If, after a decent interval, her wedding with Grandison were celebrated in a quiet way at a fashionable church, Virginia thought she might reconcile herself to it. After all, Grandison through his late wife was connected with several noble families and his proficiency as an artist must

not be lost sight of. Virginia was not exactly a snob; she only imposed on herself the defects of qualities derived from an exalted alliance.

Relatively, therefore, she was in a tractable frame of mind when Marlbury came into the room. She knew what had brought him. Early that morning she had felt it incumbent on her to send him a note of complaint. He held it in his hand. He ignored her cold invitation to sit down. He stood looking rather helplessly at the graceful, cold-hearted woman to whom he had given his name.

Hang it all, why could n't she be human and conform to the rules of the married game as played by people in their peculiar position? If she refused to be a wife she might at least try to be a pal, a companion! As it was, they had n't an interest in common. As far as he could tell she was insensible to human emotions, had no likes or dislikes, no enthusiasms or hobbies. She simply seemed to live in order to discharge social functions and to act as duenna to Irene, in an age when girls have practically dispensed with social supervision.

"I got your letter," he began awkwardly. "I understand your delicacy in writing instead of having — er — a wordy wrangle. In a sense, I suppose, you have a right to cut up rough."

"Is this an apology?" she asked.

"Well, if I'd known you were lunching at the Ritz with friends I certainly should n't have taken Tiny — Miss Blake to the same restaurant. I have all sorts of faults, but to subject you — knowingly — to any unpleasantness is n't one of them. I'm deuced sorry it occurred."

"Thank you. It was a regrettable incident. I don't want to enlarge on it. But, if you must entertain — peculiar people — I hope you will have the consideration to select less well-known resorts in future."

The subject was closed as far as Virginia was concerned, but Marlbury had not finished.

"In case you consider that I owe you an explanation about Tiny Blake, I may as well give it now," he said.

"I don't think it is necessary. The name is sufficient explanation. And now that I have seen the — lady I would rather you did not. She is so very obvious." Virginia smiled drearily. "Really, the more disreputable a woman is the greater the fascination she seems to have for some men. It's very deplorable and very extraordinary. Even Mervyn, whom I thought so fastidious, has not escaped the contagion, it appears."

Marlbury was not going to be dragged into a side-issue. He knew nothing of any lapse of Carter's from the path of rectitude. And anyway Carter was a bachelor.

"It's not a question of fascination in my case," he said. "I'm not an impressionable boy, Virginia. I'm simply a human, middle-aged man who is damned lonely."

"You surprise me," was her supercilious rejoinder.

Her raised eyebrows and her disdainful smile irritated him.

"Do I? Why? I married you for love, or, at any rate, for the nearest thing to it that a man not in his first youth can hope for. I made no concealment of that hope, nor of my feelings towards you. What did you marry *me* for?"

She had picked up her pen and was writing at random with a dry nib. She did not answer.

"Did you love me?"

As she still kept silence Marlbury answered the question for her.

"Of course you did n't! Moreover, you did n't act straight. You let me think I might make you care —

afterwards. I found I'd made a mistake. Since then have you ever shown me the slightest affection?"

"I can't help it if — if I'm undemonstrative," she stammered. "The exhibition of feeling is — vulgar. I've no doubt that your notorious friend, Miss Tiny Blake, makes up for my deficiencies in that respect."

"You do yourself an injustice," he retorted with an angry flush. "When it comes to a show of *ill*-feeling, even though you have n't an atom of reason for it, you succeed only too well. You're utterly mistaken about Tiny Blake. She's not what you think. In your cold and rigid way you disapprove of her and her sort, but you don't see that it's you and women like you who drive men to seek distraction in their society. A man — any man — wants friendship, companionship. Tiny Blake is nothing more to me at present than a very decent and loyal little friend. I don't love her, but when I want human sympathy — when I'm simply fed up with the life of coldness and repression that I get in this house — is it surprising that I should go where I can find it? Do you realize that for ten years, with the exception of my friendship for Tiny — and I repeat it has never been anything more than friendship — I've been faithful to you?"

Virginia stopped scribbling.

"I don't see any particular merit in that," she declared. "I have also been faithful to you."

"Then if that's the case," he cried, "why on earth can't you behave humanly? Hang it all, I married you for love, Virginia. I care for you still. We're husband and wife. I'm perfectly willing — if you say the word — to chuck up my friendship with any one you don't like. But I must have something in return. If you can't or won't give it, it means we've come to the end of our tether."

His earnestness did not stir her.

"I don't think I understand you," she said.

"You shall. I've said more than once that I hoped we might come together again. All these years I've stood it out — this moral divorce — partly because to end it would mean the washing of our dirty linen in public. I bar that. But I've also stood it because I — I wanted you. If it had n't been for the war I might have let things rip. The war has made a change in me as well as in others. It made me see things in a new light — marriage and human affections and all that. There were women who broke their hearts when their men went. I had an idea you would n't care if I did n't come back. If you'd cared you'd have given me an affectionate word or two when I got the route. You did n't . . . And out there one had time to think, to realize that the only solid thing that mattered supremely was love. I dare say that's why so many people got married in a hurry. It may have been rash, but love's a good enough prize to gamble for . . ." He made a despairing gesture. "Well, the war's over, and the world's getting into its stride again. But it's not the same stride, Virginia. The thing we've all learnt — old stagers like myself especially — is to make the best of our remaining chances — to value love, human love, before everything."

Not since the days of their early married life had Virginia known him to talk so feelingly. But those days were such a long way off. What he said now sounded like a reproach.

"I really don't see what all this leads up to," she said restively.

"It leads up to this. I've told you pretty plainly what I expect. Wifely affection and companionship. Dash it, it is n't more than I have a right to expect. Irene will

probably be married before long. Let's clear out of this and go off for a long cruise together. Just we two."

"I hate the sea." She shuddered. "You have such uncomfortable ideas of pleasure, Marlbury."

"You refuse, then?"

She answered him with another question.

"What is your alternative? I suppose you have one."

Her uncompromising insensibility disappointed and balked him. It stiffened his resolution to put an end to the *impasse*.

"My alternative is quite simple," he said, coldly. "It is to take such happiness as I can get in some other direction. I don't say it will approach the happiness it's in your power to bestow, but which you refuse to give. I must be satisfied with the nearest equivalent, that's all."

Either she did not or would not take him seriously. She consulted the engagement block on her writing-desk. It reminded her that at three-thirty she was to preside at the opening of a *crèche* in one of the suburbs, deputizing for a Royalty who had failed through illness. She got up. It was time to dress for the affair.

"I don't see that we do the slightest good in going over this old ground," she said. "And I have an appointment. You're detaining me. Honestly, Marlbury, I've nothing to say. The war has probably upset your nerves or digestion and made you unduly sentimental. I'm quite ready to overlook yesterday's unfortunate contretemps at the Ritz, and that's as much as you ought to expect."

Marlbury swung round on his heel and left the room. Virginia, as scrupulous about an appointment as Royalty itself, duly kept hers at the *crèche*. Afterwards she had one or two visits to pay and did not get home till it was time to dress for dinner.

Irene was dining with Carter and Grandison, prior to

going to the first night of "Spatch-Cock" at the Diplomats'. Virginia found herself alone. Marlbury she supposed had as usual gone to his club.

Whilst changing into a dinner gown her mind reverted to his overtures of the afternoon. Deep down in her heart she was aware of her shortcomings as a wife and comrade. Her conscience pricked her somewhat. But the love Marlbury asked for was not in her to give. She had shut the gates of feeling on herself ten years or more ago when she had turned down Sam, the clod, because he was not ambitious . . . But Sam had once kissed her on the lips. No man had ever done that since, not even her husband on her wedding day. She had only offered him a fragrant but indifferent cheek . . .

Late in the day for regret though it was, it occurred to her that she might have been a little less frigid with Marlbury. It would n't have cost her anything. It was n't quite a square deal to give nothing and take so much. Very precious to her was her position as the Countess of Marlbury . . .

She heard the door open and she turned with a half smile expecting to see Marlbury back from his club, eager to pursue his persuasions. But it was her maid with a note in his handwriting. She opened it, her heart quickening its normal, steady beat.

Marlbury did not waste words. He referred to their interview, her irreconcilable attitude, and intimated that the circumstances being what they were he had made up his mind not to return to her. It offered her certain facilities for freedom, referred her to his lawyers, and stated that by the time she received it the writer would be on his way to Paris, not alone.

She tore the note into tidy, tiny pieces, and sat for a long time thinking . . . Then, slowly, with the stateliness

that was part of her nature, she took off the historic rope of pearls which she wore nearly every night of her life. Pride would not suffer her to wear them any longer. They would now probably pass into the possession of Tiny Blake, who to give her her due, which Virginia was incapable of doing, cared not a fig for pearls or any of the symbols of position and place, but who loved Marlbury to the fullest measure of her plebeian little heart . . .

XXI

SASSONI's telegram, re-wired on from the Actors' Touring Club, was engaging Bowman's close attention. He had to exercise considerable ingenuity to decipher it.

Jake fond u com meat Cobbolds street Soho Thursday to tel u at five poun plise Sassoni.

Finally he translated it:

Jackie found — you come meet [me] Cobbolds Street, Soho, Thursday [at] two — tell you all — five pounds please. Sassoni.

So the organ-grinding chap had located Jackie at last and was ready to divulge her whereabouts directly he got the reward. Not before. *Five pounds, too!*

"Raised me three pounds, have you?" thought Bowman. "You wait a bit, my Dago friend!"

A day had been lost in transit owing to the fact that the wire had first gone to Bardwick where "Dead Men's Shoes" was showing for three nights ending yesterday. It was Thursday to-day and the time was ten o'clock.

Bowman had promised to take Milly Winter for a joy-ride into the country. Without troubling to let her know of his change of plan he motored to London instead, hiring the car and the chauffeur for the day. With Jackie in view he was indifferent to the expense. Moreover, he thought he saw a way of making Sassoni pay for it. As a showman, Bowman knew all about getting back on the swings what he might lose on the roundabouts. He would teach the greasy blighter to blackmail him! Five pounds for just an address? Why, a private detective would n't have the face to ask all that! Not that detectives were much in Bowman's line. For reasons of his own he had

an instinctive dislike of the professional sleuth. As for Sassoni, when he had served his purpose he could be ignored. Greasy foreigners were n't meant to be treated straight, did n't expect it, did n't deserve it.

Sitting beside the chauffeur he whistled blithely on his way up to town. He felt sure he was at last about to run Jackie and Benny to earth and he felt very much as a ferret must on approaching a rabbit warren. He promised himself good sport, the best of sport. They should squeal, those two. As for Milly, silly, faithful little fool, he'd take her for her jaunt to-morrow, or maybe tell her to go to the devil. He was n't quite sure which. Sometimes her slavish devotion flattered him; at others it merely bored.

For many weeks now Milly had been living in a fool's paradise. Ever since that night walk with Bowman in Poole Park her world had blossomed afresh. She had been able to overrule her father's objections and cautions when she proudly flashed a diamond ring before his eyes, and half convinced him it was a sign that Bowman was at last about to make reparation for his past treatment of her. Not that Winter wanted Milly to marry him. He would far rather have seen her the wife of young Measurer. But as she seemed bent on throwing herself away on Bowman, it was some faint consolation to believe that he meant to act honestly by her in the future. Sometimes, in spite of the splendid ring on her thin finger, he found himself mistrustful of Bowman's intentions, just as sometimes he even doubted the intrinsic value of the ring itself. The stones were so dead white. They gave out no magic lights.

They were in truth paste of the most specious kind. Bowman, in love or otherwise, was not the man to bestow genuine jewellery on any woman. The huge solitaire in

his own ring was a sham, and as he himself could not distinguish any difference between the real and the counterfeit he assumed that others were equally unenlightened. If sham jewellery was good enough for him who could have afforded real, it was certainly good enough for a cheap little baggage like Milly.

It happened to be her birthday that day, and the proposed joy-ride was to have been Bowman's oblation to it. As it grew later and neither he nor the car turned up at the appointed time, she started for the garage thinking that he might be waiting there for her.

On her way she met George Measurer. She would have passed on with a word and a nod, but he stopped her. Milly's preference for her burly, bullying manager as against this young, clean-living man, who in addition was a gentleman, was one of those queer feminine perversions which baffle the psychologist and keep the divorce court busy. Here was Measurer, pleasant to look on, honourable-minded, engaging, attractive, to whom she could give nothing beyond a lukewarm liking; whereas Bowman, Heaven knows why or how, had lit a furnace in her heart far too fierce for her gentle temperament, one that would never go out until it had consumed her.

"I was just coming to wish you many happy returns," said Measurer. "And also to tell you that I met the gov'nor just now in a car. He shouted that he'd been called up to town and asked me to let you know. He says he may not be back to-night. His understudy is to take his place if he is n't."

Milly's disappointment was intense.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, "and I was looking forward to to-day so much! We were going to Barford and on through Waveney, and have dinner at an inn. It was to have been my birthday present."

Measurer felt inadequate and uncomfortable. He took it for granted that she was engaged to the gov'nor, and that she did n't care a fig for himself. With diffidence he offered himself as a substitute. She could still have her drive. He'd love to take her if she would come. Milly hesitated. Bowman was always trampling on her sensibilities. It made her wish to avoid hurting those of others. But when Measurer shyly presented her with a little gold heart with a pearl in its centre on a slender chain, she felt it would be horribly unkind to refuse.

Swallowing her disappointment she thanked him for the pretty trinket and said that she would like to come. They went on to the garage together.

Measurer hired a side-car. It was small and it was cheap, but it had its advantages. Unlike Bowman he could drive, and it permitted them to take their little excursion without a chauffeur. The swift movement through fresh air brought the colour back into Milly's cheeks. Her drooping spirits revived. After all it was her birthday. And it was awfully good of George (it had been George and Milly with them not so long ago) to give her such a treat. She enjoyed herself far more than she had expected. Indeed, every now and then she forgot Bowman altogether. George was good company. Besides, he was — or had been — in love with her. Just for a little, for to-day only, the thousand and one little attentions which he paid her were very gratifying, if only in contrast with Bill's cavalier manner.

The only occurrence that marred an otherwise pleasant day was an accident that happened to her ring. On their way home she noticed that one of the stones was missing. Apparently it had dropped out.

"Whatever will Bill say?" she exclaimed in discomfiture. "And it's so unlucky too!"

Measurer glanced down at the ring and then up at her anxious face.

"Would you like to stop at a jeweller's in Waveney and have a stone put in?" he enquired.

"But a diamond that size would cost pounds and pounds!"

"Well, just as you like. I don't know much about the price of rings, Milly. I might have, perhaps, if you'd only given me a chance."

They stopped at a jeweller's on the way home, at Milly's request.

"I may as well find out what it will cost to have another stone put in," she said. "Come in and advise me."

In the shop Milly held out her hand to the jeweller.

"What would it cost to have a paste diamond put in here, please?" she enquired. "Would it look very noticeable amongst the other stones?"

"It would n't be noticeable at all, miss," was the prompt reply. "All these stones are paste. To replace the missing one would cost you about five shillings. Hardly worth while, considering the ring can't have cost more than seven-and-six."

"Oh, but you're making a dreadful mistake!" she cried indignantly. "They're real diamonds. It's—it's an engagement ring."

Evidently the shopman had got beyond the age of romance or he might have let Milly down more lightly. He put the ring on the counter.

"All the same it's a dud, miss. That's all I've got to say about it. That little heart you're wearing is worth twenty times more than the ring, because it's real."

Milly, utterly discomfited, picked up her ring and left the shop. She did not put it on her finger again. Measurer drove away in silence. The sad expression on her face

hurt him dreadfully. Not until they were nearly home did he speak.

"Milly," he said.

She turned her head.

"About that ring. Are you upset because it's not genuine?"

"Mr. Bowman must have been taken in, of course," she said with quivering lips. "He would n't give me imitation jewellery."

Measurer took his courage in his hands.

"Suppose he has? Do you intend asking him?"

Her reply, made as they came to a stop before her lodgings, sounded the death-knell of his hopes.

"Yes, of course I shall . . . But it can't alter anything. My love is real . . . Thank you ever so much for to-day. I have enjoyed it all. Really I have."

After all, her meed of thanks was something. But he was sorry about the ring. If it made her happier to believe in Bowman's good faith, which he had learnt to question, he could only hope — for her sake — that she might never have cause to regret it.

Bowman did not return by the late afternoon train. Indeed, he stayed in London overnight. Developments of a highly interesting nature kept him there. The scent was good. He'd picked it up, or rather Sassoni had for him. At two o'clock he met the Italian at the appointed place.

Sassoni approached wreathed in smiles. He duly noted Bowman's hired car and prosperous appearance. The signor doubtless was rich — *molto opulento*. He had been foolish to ask so little as five pounds, although he well knew he had only been promised two. An extortionate cupidity provoked him, as with much scraping and rubbing of hands he informed Bowman of his meeting with

Jackie. Oh, yes, he had her address, a veritable *palazzo*. He had been inside it. He had talked much with her. She was to appear that very night at a London theatre. He mangled the name of it.

"Sure it's the right girl?" asked Bowman.

"Ah, certo! Assolutamente!"

"Was there a cripple anywhere about? They'd be sure to be together."

Yes, on the couch there had lain a pale-faced boy, doubtless with a crooked back. Sassoni had hardly noticed Benny, but he would have sworn to a giraffe in the room or confirmed any other evidence that Bowman might have shown a desire for.

"Well, then, what's the address? Spit it out."

Sassoni held out a dirty hand.

Bowman waved it away.

"Not so fast, monkey-face. Think I'm going to buy a pig in a poke? Not much!"

"You pay me — straight, if I tell it?" asked Sassoni suspiciously.

"Straight's the word. That's me every time."

Sassoni stroked an unshaven chin thoughtfully. Then, like one under compulsion, and again with his hand out, he divulged the street and the number.

Bowman made a note of it, then shook his head at the outspread fingers.

"First I've got to verify this address. If it's all right — not a sell — you shall have your five quid." To himself he added, "I don't think!"

Sassoni ejaculated something full of ire in Italian.

"You keep your temper, Mr. Barrel-organo, or you may n't get anything at all. I'll meet you again on this spot to-night at six. Savvy?"

Sassoni, again under compulsion, savvied. He made

one more attempt to get his money down, the reward which he considered he had justly earned. Bowman merely repeated the hour of meeting, climbed into his car and drove off, leaving Sassoni looking after him out of pessimistic eyes.

At six, minus his barrel-organ, he was back at the trysting place. At seven he was still there. At eight. By that time he had arrived at the cold conviction that he who would have sold his grandmother for two *soldi*, had himself been sold . . . duped . . .

His swarthy countenance was convulsed with rage. His eyes gleamed evilly. His lean, brown hand with its curving, acquisitive fingers thrust itself into the sash around his waist, feeling for something that always lay there. And his lips mutely registered a vow — the “I-will-repay” of his race.

XXII

A FEW minutes before the curtain was rung up on the first night of "Spatch-Cock" Calderon bustled into Jackie's dressing-room. She was ready; she looked quite composed.

"Not nervous? That's right. There's Kitty Johnson throwing hysterical fits in No. 5, and she's only got two lines to speak. I'll cut 'em. Look here, Jackie, I take it you know that the success of the show depends more or less on you. Tester can't go wrong; but a man's part has never yet been written that'll carry a piece through by itself. If you do the trick to-night you shall have a hundred pounds a week. Does that fire you to make good, eh, kid?"

"More money is always good," answered Jackie. "But it is not possible to make an artiste a success by the offer of it. If I am artiste I cannot hide it, and if I am not I will make a failure. But I will not make a failure," she asserted, cheerfully. "I have not made a failure on all the days I rehearse, so why should I do so now? I could not be afraid of the numbers of people. Why should they not all be my friends?"

It was with this childish faith that she made her first appearance before that most critical of assemblies, a first-night London audience.

Calderon might have spared himself his eleventh-hour qualms. From the moment she faced the footlights she was another being, the Mariette of the play and the author's conception of the character. She got into the skin of the part from the very beginning. It was all so real to her that she made it real to the packed house, from its

gods in the gallery to its critics in the stalls, to her dear Merveen and Irene in a private box, watching her with their hearts in their mouths. She made more than a good impression: she appealed to the theatreful of people as irresistibly as she had done to Audagna and Calderon in the practice-room.

Calderon had been careful to excise a number of questionable lines and dubious jokes which had been inserted for Jackie's predecessor. Now the part was bright and wholesome. Jackie's artlessness gave point to every word of it. Her silvery voice invested it with peculiar charm; her piquant accent gave it unexpected meaning.

In the first act she was a child — a dancing child — in love with life, a butterfly of a thing. She fluttered about the stage on twinkling feet, soared in spirit across the footlights and into the hearts of her audience. Each time they applauded her Calderon saw his under-part investment going to a giddy premium.

But her real test came in the second act. Ten years were supposed to have elapsed. The child had become a woman. Jackie had to express in dancing the joy of love, and later the despair of love believing itself forsaken. She succeeded beyond all belief. What she could not know from experience imagination and temperament informed her. Her pantomime was as graceful as it was expressive: she could captivate with a glance or wring the heart with a gesture. In the later scenes she lifted the revue on to a plane where cheap humour, catch-phrase, and all the other stunts of the variety stage, had no place. The house marvelled and admired. To see one so young, so fairy-like, so unknown, and yet so unafraid, flitting to and fro like a leaf blown by the wind, depicting first the ecstasies of pleasure and then the torments of despair, compelled their wonder. During the past fortnight she had pro-

gressed astonishingly in technique. Audagna had seen to that. Nearly all her waking moments had been dancing ones. This was the result.

When the last curtain descended Calderon, waiting in the wings, gave her a joyful hug. He simply could n't help it. Audagna was there too, with tears of pleasure brimming his old eyes. A muffled clamour came through the curtain, increasing every moment.

"You blessed kid!" cried Calderon. "They're ready to eat you! Come on! Come on and let 'em see you! Splendid little winner!"

He took her hand and pulled her before the audience. It was not in Jackie to bow conventional thanks. She held out her hands in dumb gesture, very Gallic, that embraced the whole house. Down swished the curtains. Continuous applause sent them up again. And Jackie stood there, a small, slight girl on a huge stage. Calderon had retreated. This time her voice was heard, piping, birdlike.

"Oh, I do so love you all. Thank you for loving Jackie."

They let her go at last, her triumph complete. In her dressing-room, a little dazed by her success, she had to hold a court. Everybody wanted to kiss her — Calderon, Audagna, Tracey the comedian, principal ladies and ladies of the chorus with whom principle gave way to grace. For once there was an absence of professional jealousy — a rare thing and a strange. Who could be jealous of Jackie with the childlike, golden heart? In return she hugged and kissed everybody exuberantly. Truly she felt that she was the little friend of all the world. To-morrow her name would be in coloured electric lights across the front of the theatre. A more wonderful thing this to her than a hundred pounds a week.

It was a great moment, too, when Carter, accompanied

by Irene and Grandison, came to fetch her away. There was to be a little supper at Carter's flat before she went home to bed. She was terribly tired. She fell asleep quite suddenly at the supper-table. Carter lifted her on to a couch. When she awoke Grandison had gone. Irene was putting on her cloak in the adjoining room.

Carter was sitting by her side watching her. She had been smiling so happily in her sleep. But just before she opened her eyes she flinched as though something had hurt her. She sat up with a little cry.

"Nightmare, Jackie?" he asked with a laugh. "Come along, little sleepy-head. It's time to go home."

Jackie rubbed her eyes.

"Oh, I wish that I had not slept!" she exclaimed. "It was a bad dream, Merveen. I was on the stage again, but not in 'Spatch-Cock.' I was standing and waiting for that bad Bowman to lasso me with his stock-whip of which I have told you. It whistle round my throat and then it catch me. And he pull me nearer, nearer, like a fish on a hook."

She gave herself a shake to rid herself of the unpleasant obsession.

"Lobster salad is n't good for little girls at twelve o'clock at night," he said with a laugh.

Irene came back into the room.

"Come along, you wonderful Jackie!" she cried. "Mervyn is going to drop me at my house before he takes you home."

Five minutes later, when Irene on her doorstep had called her last "good night," and the couple were alone in the car Carter took Jackie's hand and drew it through his arm.

"Happy, dear little girl?" he asked. "Your star is shining bright to-night."

Jackie snuggled against him.

"Are you gratified that I am a success, Merveen?" she cooed.

"Stupendously gratified! Is n't it what you've set your heart on?" After a momentary pause he said, more to himself than to her: "It can't alter what I feel for you."

"What is it that you feel for me?" she murmured, sleepily.

"I'll tell you one day, perhaps — when you're tired of dancing."

"But I shall never be tired of dancing, Merveen. Tell me now."

"You're too young, dear. You would n't understand."

He had to fight down the temptation to take her into his arms and tell her of the love and yearning he had for her. To make such a demand on her feelings at a moment like this when she must be intoxicated by success would be unchivalrous. He wanted to be just — fair. She was so young. He was the only man she yet knew. Her feelings towards him were biassed by gratitude. She was entitled to look round first, to exercise her heart's choice. Her next words seemed to give proof of this — a proof of her purely childish regard for him and her absolute ignorance of the particular quality of his own.

"You will always love me, please, Merveen?"

"I guess so."

"Even when I am married?"

"Even when you are married. But you have n't fallen in love, have you? You won't do that without telling me first?" A great anxiety inspired the last words.

She lifted his hand and, kitten-like, rubbed her cheek against it.

"I love everybody," she said. "But most of all you."

Even more than my dear Benny. I do not think I shall love a husband more than I love you."

The car stopped. They had reached her flat.

Mervyn crushed her little hand in his. He dared not speak; he was afraid to accompany her upstairs, lest he should be unable to resist the mighty impulses that agitated him. After that last sweet confession it was hard to let her go. But he did.

Jackie went up in the lift. The housekeeper whom Irene had engaged would be in bed. She had been told not to wait up. Why, therefore, were the lights in the little drawing-room not out? Through the half-opened door she could see that they were full on. The fumes of a bad cigar reached her.

As she pushed open the door, Bowman, who had been lying on the sofa, his dirty boots soiling the dainty chintz, got up and lurched towards her.

Jackie shrank back in alarm.

"Hullo, Jackie," he said with an evil grin, "I've been waiting for you. Are n't you going to say you're glad to see me?"

XXIII

WHILE he waited for Jackie, Bowman took careful stock of her flat. A snug crib this! He knew the sort of rents that were being paid for flats in London and he reckoned this one — he assumed she had taken it furnished — to be costing her, or whoever it was who paid for it, something like ten guineas a week. She must be feathering her nest with a vengeance! He must have a finger in that pie. He wondered what her salary at the Diplomats' could be. He was consumed with curiosity. How in thunder had she arrived at the leading part in a London revue? He had spent the evening witnessing her performance and her success. Her success did n't surprise him very much. Had n't he prophesied it? What enraged him was that she should have won it without his assistance. He felt he'd been had. Somebody else was going to profit by her talent.

Unless he could prevent it! By God, he could and he would! He'd got a hold over her and he'd use it. That was the game to play . . . It was n't too late. He saw himself exploiting her. He saw her a public favourite, paragraphed, photographed, courted, fussed over, "all the go" — and himself in the background pulling the strings, putting up her salary, living on it in luxury! If she could afford a flat like this now, what would n't she be able to afford later on? . . . It would mean, too, that he could chuck up provincial management and life in country pubs. He'd be in town, in the swim. He'd get put up for the Eccentric Club, perhaps even the Green Room. The prospect carried him to still giddier heights. With Jackie a London star, rolling in money, why should n't

he be one as well? Like every provincial actor he had the ambition to strut upon a London stage. He was experienced, he knew the business backwards, vanity assured him that he could "wipe the floor" with half these leading men who topped the bill! By thunder, he'd do it! He'd go into London management, star himself, have a leading lady of his own and make a reputation for himself in serious drama!

These expansive thoughts made him reconsider what he had originally planned to do. It had been his intention to spirit Benny away while Jackie was at the theatre and then return to deal with her. But Benny, as he had discovered after a systematic search of the flat, was not there. To make sure, he had gone into Jackie's bedroom, looked under the bed, even in the wardrobe.

In that room he had lingered, taking note of its pretty furnishings, the evidences of prosperity. He had never before seen such a bedroom. He looked uncomprehendingly at a carved, gilt prie-dieu and a flower-decked shrine on which stood the Virgin and several saints illuminated by a silver lamp. (These were presents from Carter.) They brought a sardonic expression into his face. He had no use for religion; he never invoked the name of his Creator except as an expletive. He was totally lacking in reverence of any description. He saw no poetry, no lovely thought, in this silent revelation of the innate piety of Jackie's soul.

He returned to the drawing-room, made another round of it, this time in search of something to drink, but finding only water and a bottle of lemon squash, had recourse to a flask in his pocket. Then he threw himself on to the couch, punched a Rose-du-Barry *pouffe* into shape for his greasy head, lit an acrid-smelling cigar, and waited.

The longer he waited the more he looked forward to

the approaching encounter. He had n't quite made up his mind exactly how he was going to put the screw on Jackie. All he knew was that he'd make her pay. He'd frighten the soul out of her. That was his paramount idea — to scare her; to make her life a misery; to use her how and when he pleased. His mental attitude towards her was Hunnish. It had always given him intense pleasure to hurt anything helpless, animal or human. This was his motive for wanting to get hold of Benny. He wanted him in order to maltreat him. Through Benny he could make Jackie's life a special little hell. It was his idea of sport.

Her wonderfully successful performance at the theatre only whetted his cruel appetite. It gave him an unholy pleasure to know that he had her in his power. He expected her to put up a fight. She would n't be Jackie if she did n't. That would give additional zest to the game.

Jackie's sensation when she came in to find him there was one of consternation. She was so entirely unprepared for his appearance. She came to a tense stop, gave a gasp, and then turned to rush from the room with the frenzied notion of calling Carter, who by this time was half a mile away.

Bowman made a jump and caught hold of her.

"No, you don't!" he said. "Got to stop, my little pet, now you're here. We've a lot to talk about." He drew her close to him. "Are n't you going to give me a kiss and say how glad you are to see me?"

At that her cold panic changed to hot anger. Exercising all her strength she got free and struck him in the face with her open hand.

"Sale bête!" she panted. "Do that again and I call the police. How have you come into my flat at night like a

thief? It is a importunité — a — a — grossièreté! Are you mad?"

"Not a bit of it! Night's the best time for our business — with a little love and kisses thrown in and a slice of hate for spice. Thieves don't come in the way I did. I just rung the bell, same as any visitor might, and a servant let me in." He stopped to grin. "When I said I was your fiancé, of course she told me to make myself comfortable, and I told her to toddle off to bed. You would n't have the heart to wake the poor old woman up, would you? As for the police you can call them in if you like. I should have a nice little story to tell them. I should have thought you'd prefer to throw yourself on my loving kindness rather than want their protection, seeing what's between you and me."

His domineering voice and his reference to the police kept her silent.

"Come now," he continued; "let's get to cues. First of all, where's that knife, and second, where's Benny?"

Jackie stood against the wall, near the door. She was terrorized. Not on her own account. Had it not been for Benny she would have dared him to do his worst. Never should he lay hands again upon her dear Benny. She would undergo the rack rather than give him up.

"I have not Benny here," she replied. "You can search if you wish. And I will never tell you where he is." Determination brought her courage back. "Do you think I would render him to you who have broke his poor back? You can break me first, but you will not make me intimidate enough for that."

Bowman laughed derisively, dropped on to the couch, and puffed coolly at his noxious weed.

"I don't think you savvy the laws of this country," he observed with a shrug. "You can drop your blessed

ranting. You're not on the stage now, my girl. Benny is my lawful property. I'm his guardian until he's twenty-one. Until then I can bally well do what I like with him. See?"

She had to believe him. Respect for the law, of which she knew absolutely nothing, daunted her. But it made her all the more resolute to lie and scheme or bribe — anything, everything — to keep Benny from his clutches.

"And the person who conceals him," Bowman proceeded, implacably, "can get into hot water. You talk about the police! Why, if I liked to call them in they could *make* you tell me where he is. I'd have him back to-morrow! That's the English law."

"Then why did you not go to the police in the beginning?" she had the wit to retort.

"Why, simply because of my kind heart, my pet! I thought I'd give you a chance to own up first. It would be rather a pity to have the police accusing you of trying to murder me and then giving me the go-by with Benny, would n't it? Especially now you've made a hit on the stage. I suppose you'll be denying next that you knifed me in the dark, outside the summer-house with the poisoned dagger that you're hiding to this day."

The look of absolute repudiation that had come into her face brought him to a stop.

"*Did n't* you do it?" he demanded. "If you did n't who the —" He broke off, staring at her suspiciously. Then suddenly light dawned on him, explaining the reason why she might have taken it into her head to run away with Benny instead of alone. If she had n't knifed him herself, then Benny had, and she was shielding him. He wondered why he had n't thought of it before.

"Of course," was his reservation, "when I say you did it, I mean Benny just as much. More likely to be him

following me in the dark. He could look slippery enough when he liked. Most of his pain was make-believe. However, whichever way it is it's black for you and black for him. I can have him put in quod and you as well as accessory after the fact."

The legal phrase completed Jackie's discomfiture. The threat it conveyed would have frightened a child, and because in effect she was one it sounded convincing enough to her. She had a lurid vision of Benny in a cold, dark cell, breaking his heart in prison, dying there, his chance of a cure gone for ever. She imagined herself locked up in another prison, powerless to help him. And even if this *sale bête* did not have them arrested, he could still claim Benny and carry him off. Benny's misgivings had not been unfounded after all. If Bowman could find her so easily, it was too much to expect that Benny could escape him. They were both cornered.

It passed through her mind that she might appeal to Carter for protection; but even he, any more than herself, was not above the law. He could not keep Benny from his legal guardian. Besides, it would mean disclosing Benny's guilt, an impossible thing to do.

There was not a trace of self-preservation in her racing thoughts. She thought of nothing but the awful fact that this man was about to wrest Benny from her, to wreak his vengeance upon the hapless, helpless boy.

She fell on her knees. She pleaded wildly, incoherently. She forgot all her English and poured out streams of French.

Bowman, reclining like a Sultan on the couch, watched her out of sordid eyes. It gave him a joyful sensation to see stubborn Jackie on her knees. He had bent her before breaking her. It was a happy omen.

"I will tell you all, everything," she finished piteously.

"Except where Benny is. He has gone to be made better. His back will be mended. Have you the heart of a devil that you cannot leave him in peace? Ask of me anything and I will give it to you if you make a promise to abandon search of him."

Bowman sat up and pitched the stump of his cigar into the grate.

"Ah," he said, "now we're talking sense. . . . Suppose I was in the mind to let you down easy. First what have you got to give? Shall we say a hundred pounds — in notes, and a kiss to show there's no ill-feeling?"

She thought she detected a more lenient note in his voice. If all he wanted was money it would be policy to bargain.

"A hundred pounds?" She pretended amazement. "But where should I obtain such a sum? Do you think I am made of a million?"

"Not you, personally," he answered, with a knowing wink. "But judging by all this" — he waved his hand with the false diamond glittering on it — "and your fine clothes, I'm ready to bet that you're on good terms with some bloke who *is*. Should n't be surprised if it was that mounseer you were in such a stew to meet the day I first saw you. Well, you've improved the shining hours, and yourself too, since I saw you last, my dear. I don't mind admitting you're an absolute peach to look at. Not quite ripe yet, p'r'aps, but when you are . . ." He smacked his lips gluttonously.

"Will you make me an undertaking not to take away my Benny — my *chéri*?" she reiterated.

"And if I won't?"

She was on her feet now, her teeth clenched, her face white.

"I will 'ate you for the rest of my life!" she cried

passionately. "But for Benny I would truly tell you to take yourself away to the devil! Do you think I fear you for myself? I would snap my fingers at you — so! But Benny! If it was known to him that you come to steal him away I am sure he would die. It would be better that he should die."

"I dare say," he said heedlessly. This crazy anxiety for Benny was going to be of advantage to him. Through Benny he could work on her fears, make her pay. He wondered what her salary was. She'd broken her contract with him, done him out of her services. Why should n't he take his due of her salary. She could n't be getting less than twenty pounds a week.

"What are you getting at the Diplomats?" he enquired.

"One hundred pounds a week." It was said in an indifferent voice. She was thinking of other things.

"*What?*"

Hardly noticing his astonishment she said:

"You will not change your mind about Benny, then?"

Bowman appeared to consider.

"I won't bind myself to any hard-and-fast promises. You can't get over me by floppin' on your knees and pullin' out the vibrato stop. Nor yet by thinking you can get round my soft side. I have n't got one. I'll tell you my terms and you can take 'em or leave 'em. It's as you like. If you *don't* like, well, then, the band'll begin to play. First, instead of one hundred pounds I want five hundred pounds — indemnity. You can easily afford that out of a hundred a week! I'll give you three days to get it. I shan't be able to run up to town again before then. Second, I intend to drop in here whenever the fit takes me. Third, if I feel like kissing you I mean to, and if, on the other hand, I feel like giving you a taste of what

your 'cheery' Benny's had I'll do that too. Is that clear?"

Only too clear! She saw that she would have to buy him off. There was no other way. She drew her little figure up and tried to speak with dignity and self-command.

"I accept your beastly price," she said. "If you will come again on an evening next week I will obtain you the money. Now will you go? I am fatigued."

Indeed, what with physical weakness and emotional stress, she was almost in a state of collapse.

Bowman got up.

"Yes, I'll go in a minute." He went up to her. "Now don't you shrink away, and don't you hit out either. Put your hands out."

He took hold of them and while he leered down at her began exercising a gradual pressure on her fingers until she had to set her lips and teeth to prevent herself crying out with the pain.

"God!" he said. "You've got tiny bones. I could crunch you into little bits."

He let go with a laugh. Then he caught her to him, jerked up her face, held it so that her struggles were of no avail, and kissed her savagely on the lips.

When she was free of him she turned and fled into her bedroom, locking the door.

She heard him call out, "Saturday night — same time," and then the flat door slammed.

She flung herself on her bed, beating the pillows, sobbing tempestuously, biting her desecrated lips until they bled.

Her star, high in the heavens, shone in through the window, twinkling down upon her. But to-night she had no eyes for it. The light before her shrine burned dim. . . .

XXIV

BENNY'S bedroom at the nursing home was filled with flowers. Jackie had brought them. His bed was heaped with daily papers. He had been reading the press notices of her performance.

Jackie sat by his side. She had not slept a wink all night. There were dark circles under her eyes and her little face was pale.

Benny turned to her, scanning her with eyes of love. Judging by the papers, all of which eulogized her, she should have been in the highest spirits. Had success turned her head, taken the sparkle from her eyes, the gay words from her lips, the vivacity from her expression? Benny could n't make it out. Her quietness was incomprehensible.

"All these notices are splendid," he said. "Of course you were bound to make a success. We all knew that. Why are n't you mad with joy, Jackie? Has something gone wrong? Are you unhappy about anything?"

She forced her lips into a smile.

"But no, chéri. Have you ever know me not happy? Perhaps I am fatigued. I could not sleep last night from — from excitement."

Some of the sparkle came back into her face as she recounted her happy triumph of the night before. Benny hung on her words.

"And Mr. Calderon is so gratified that I am to receive a hundred pounds a week," she said. "Oh, Benny, make haste and get well. Then you can come back and we will go for a holiday together, perhaps to Paris."

What could she mean? Why should she be thinking of going away in the very hour of her triumph? She loved London. She disliked the idea of leaving it at any time. She was always saying so.

"What did you do after the show?" he asked.

"We had a little supper at Merveen's, the Lady Irene and Monsieur Grandison and myself. I fell asleep. Afterwards Merveen took me home in his car."

"Did n't he go up with you?"

"No."

"Then you went straight to bed?"

"I went to bed, but I could not sleep. Why do you ask so many questions?"

"Because you're different. You don't seem yourself at all. I'd swear you have something on your mind."

Jackie stared in front of her.

"I had a dream that disturb me," she said slowly. "A dream like you yourself had but the other day. I dream that Bowman come. I dream that he make threats and search for you. It was a cauchemar — what you call night-horse."

Benny leant forward.

"You dreamt he came back? Jackie, you *swear* it was only a dream?"

She saw how he trembled. That decided her. He was not fit to be told the truth.

"But naturally it was only a dream," she declared. "Only it has make me dull — in the dump. You remember that you were inquiet for the same reason."

"Yes, I know. But I've shaken it off. Somehow I've felt safe here. I suppose it's because of my chance of getting well."

Jackie was pursuing her own thoughts.

"Would you give me permission to make a breast of it

to Merveen?" she asked. "Would you not feel more protected if he knew altogether the truth?"

"You mean about my trying to kill Bowman in my sleep?" he asked in an undertone. "No, don't do that, Jackie. He might not understand. I — I could n't bear him to know. He would n't be friends with me if he did. Promise me you won't say a word. How could I expect any one to believe I did it in a dream?"

"But we are as children," she argued. "Merveen is a man, and he has made himself our friend and protector. Ought we not to tell him altogether, everything?"

"It's *my* secret," Benny answered with a touch of stubbornness. "You promised you'd never let on to a living soul. . . . Besides, you don't know for certain that I did do it. We've no proof. Oh, Jackie, if you make me worry, I shan't get better so quickly. The operation is on Monday. I want all my nerve for that."

Jackie bent and kissed him.

"But of course you are not to worry," she said gently. "We will not speak of bad things any more at all. And my dream I will shake away."

"And you'll promise never to breathe a word to Mr. Carter?"

She promised, though she found it hard. Her instincts, had she been free to follow them, would have been to pour out the whole of her anxieties to Carter. Indeed, it was not easy for a creature of her temperament to keep a secret. Characteristically she was so unreserved. But where her honour was involved, as in the present case, tortures would not have made her disclose his secret. Her pledge to keep it made everything all the more difficult for her now.

She had three days in which to produce the five hundred pounds. A latent business instinct would not let her

ask Calderon for a five weeks' advance of salary. He might refuse. If he acceded it would place her under an obligation to him. He was only her theatrical manager, not a personal friend. Her pride jibbed at asking favours of one who was little more than a stranger. There remained only Carter to whom she could go.

And to Carter she went, telephoning first to his flat to make sure that he would be at home.

Like Benny, he noticed her pallor and preoccupied air and remarked on it.

"It is true that I am *étourdie*," she admitted. "Merveen, if I demand the favour of a request would you be contented not to ask why I make it?"

"Well, I'm not a particularly curious person that I know of," said he. "Ask away, Jackie dear, and if it's the half of my kingdom you shall have it."

"It is money that I ask for. Would you have the goodness to make me the loan of five 'undred pounds?"

The request took him aback. It was not the amount that mattered. What could unmercenary, frugal-minded Jackie want with such a sum?

"Five hundred pounds?" he repeated. "Of course you can have it with the greatest of pleasure. But — what on earth do you want it for?"

"A minute ago you promise not to ask."

"Sorry. I forgot." He got out his cheque-book and picked up a pen. "It's not for yourself?" he ventured.

Jackie's eyes sought the carpet.

"Then it must be to give away. . . . A charity?"

She lifted her eyes, troubled, but clear and truthful.

"But yes, it is to give away. You would say with reason. But if because I cannot explain you do not like to lend me so much, my heart will be so heavy that it will weigh down my feet. I will tell you just a little more. It is

to keep a person who is a great sufferer out of prison. Perhaps to save a life."

"You mean you want it as surety for some one — some friend you've never told me about? You're bothered about something, Jackie. Why not tell me what it is and let me advise you?"

Jackie set her lips.

"Merveen, I cannot say more," she faltered. "Is it that I ask too much?"

"Of course not. I'll write you a cheque right now."

He picked up the pen again. She stopped him.

"Merveen, I do not want a cheque. I want billets de banque — notes."

"Then I shall have to take you round to my bank. We'll go before tea. Now will you smile again and let me see my joyous little Jackie once more?"

She did her best, but the smile was a feeble one.

"Say that you trust me, Merveen," she entreated. "Say that you do not think I am an avaricious one. I could not bear for you to think so, or that you should have any doubt of your Jackie."

"I'd trust you with my life and my soul and everything on earth I possess," he assured her solemnly. "I'd trust you always and everywhere. You must know that, little friend. And how could I possibly think you avaricious? It would be laughable!"

Jackie gave him an adoring look and said:

"Merveen, I am triste to-day. Would you take me in your embrace and kiss me, please?"

Carter's endurance was not proof against this second assault on his emotions within a few hours.

"If I take you in my arms, Jackie," he said huskily, "I might n't ever be able to let you go again . . . Can't you guess why? Oh, my dear little girl, I love you. I did n't

mean to tell you yet awhile, but I can't keep it in any longer. I think I loved you from the day when I first set eyes on you dancing in the street. I know for certain that I loved you when you turned up so providentially outside Virginia's house. I don't dare tell you how many times I've been to the bureau over there where I keep your old dancing dress, to look at it and think of you . . . I love you for the queer, dear little creature you were and the wonderful, beautiful woman you've grown into. I'm not boasting — it's the literal truth that there has only been one woman in my life of whom you might be jealous. And she was my mother. I believe that's why I love you so devotedly."

While she listened wave on wave of informing expression passed over Jackie's speaking face in quick succession — amazement, incredulity, gladness, rapture. In the joy and wonder of finding herself beloved by the man to whom she had without knowing it already given her heart, her nightmare encounter with Bowman, even his noxious existence, was forgotten. All she could think of was love — her Merveen's love. Her child's heart could hardly grasp its meaning: her woman's heart insisted on it, convinced her of its reality and its splendour.

She was like one suddenly awakened from sleep; like one born into a new world of glowing warmth and brilliant sunshine. The change in her was physical as well as mental. Life's meaning was suddenly intelligible to her. Her heart throbbed with new and wonderful ecstasies.

As a flower turns to the sun so she raised her face to Carter's; a sublimely eager face, unafraid, responsive to the love-light in his eyes.

"Mon adoré!" she cried, and voiced the swift change in their relationship by the love-pronoun of her country. "Oh, je t'aime! Je t'aime éperdument!"

XXV

"WHERE'S your ring, Milly? Pawned it?" Bowman's question, inspired by its absence from her left hand, was not altogether facetious.

She had not worn any ring for several days, but he had only just noticed it. He had not paid much attention to her since his return from London, and every night she had cried herself to sleep, accounting next morning for her red eyes by saying that she'd caught a cold. Bowman considered colds and tears unbecoming to a woman. Comparing her with Jackie he felt a sense of injury at her unattractive appearance. He was n't going through life tacked on to a girl like that. In a year or two she'd look quite washed out.

Milly had n't the courage to look up when she replied:

"It would n't be much use to pawn it, Bill. I should n't get a shilling on it."

"Humph, so you've had it priced, have you? Nothing like looking a gift horse in the mouth, is there? I don't think you're quite as disinterested as you'd like to make out, my girl."

"I did n't dream of having it priced," she protested. "Any more than I dreamt it was n't real. I lost a stone out of it, and when I went to ask about having another put in, the jeweller told me it was n't worth doing. I felt dreadful."

"Did you?" he queried callously. "You surely did n't think I'd deck you in real diamonds? You ain't worth it. The ring sparkled well enough, anyhow."

She flushed, humiliated as usual, but too much under his subjection to retaliate with spirit.

"I'd rather not wear what is n't real any more. I can wait till I have a wedding ring."

The timid remonstrance annoyed Bowman.

"Don't you make too sure of a wedding ring," he retorted. "It's a mistake to count your chickens before they're hatched, or a husband before you've got him. Things have happened during the last few days that may alter my plans considerably. I've got to think of business first. I've found some one I've been looking for."

"The French girl and Benny?" she asked alertly.

"Her. Not Benny."

"In London? The day you went up and did n't come out with me?"

"You've got it in once. I got wind of her and went to pay her a surprise call."

In a fever of anxiety Milly clasped her hands. She could not help hating the unknown foreigner. She tried to keep her voice steady.

"I suppose she was pleased to see you?"

"Pleased was n't the word. She threw herself at my feet." Bowman gave a laugh like a bark.

"She — she did n't kiss you?"

"Well . . ." He delayed his reply for the sake of the pleasure it gave him to harrow her feelings. "A kiss or two did pass between us. Don't you ask questions and you won't be told any lies. I'm not standing in your light. You can always fall back on Measurer. He's a moon-struck sort of an ass, but he's still soft about you."

"Oh, what do I care about anybody in the world but you, Bill?" she cried desperately. "I think there's only one thing that might stop my loving you. That's if you died. . . . As long as you go on living I've got to go on caring for you whatever you do — however cruel and unkind you are. It's the power you have over me, I suppose.

Bill, won't you promise me not to see the French girl again?"

Bowman got up from his chair with a short laugh.

"Not I. French-made things are 'most always fetching, from lingerey to ladies. I've got to see her to-night after the show."

"Our show?"

"No. Her show in town. She's a star in London now. No end of toffs running after her. Still, I think a nice-looking chap like me can hold his own. Oh, come off it, Milly. Don't slobber over me. I've a clean collar on. There, you've pulled a button off my coat! What's got you? It's no good kicking up a fuss. I've got to catch my train. See you to-morrow morning."

He walked off nonchalantly, whistling an obsolete music-hall ditty whose refrain maddened her:

"Good-bye, little girl, good-bye!
Don't cry, little girl, don't cry!"

Her tears never had the slightest effect on him. She turned on the tap too easily. Jackie was of the breed that fetched him. No tears from her. Too much pluck in the stiff-necked, back-talking, plump little vixen! But he'd corralled her. All the way up to town he gloated over the fact.

Jackie was prepared for him when he called at her flat that night. Hurrying away from the theatre she had got home by half-past eleven, and had the five hundred pounds in readiness. Her dread of the coming interview had lessened. For one thing, she believed that the money would buy him off completely, and then Benny would be safe. Although she loathed Bowman she hardly realized the moral danger she stood in from him. Very secure she felt now in the shelter of Carter's love. Soon he would be

in a position to protect her altogether . . . always . . . until the end. . . .

A new womanliness pervaded her, a promise of maturity, a confidence that already had in it a quaint touch of dignity. Bowman sensed it almost as soon as he set eyes on her. She was n't pale to-night. There were roses in her cheeks and her lips were soft and red. She looked as though she had been held in a man's arms and loved. . . . The beast in Bowman awoke and stirred. She was *his* prey, *his* game. . . . What right to her had any other man?

So as to have all his wits about him he had studiously kept off the drink this evening, and her beauty went to his head far more quickly than the spirit would have done. Like spirits, though, it had a pernicious effect on him. The savage in him clamoured; all his brutal instincts were accentuated by it. He would have liked to club her, take her by the hair of her head, and drag her off to his cave. Very much of a throw-back was Bowman, very primitive; a compound of beast and man, the former predominating.

"You're looking fine to-night," were his first words. "You ought always to wear red. You look more like a blazing rocket than a girl. I'm rather proud of you, Jackie. You were my find, you know. I prophesied you'd make a hit some day, did n't I?"

Jackie let the cumbrous, double-edged compliment pass.

"I have here the money ready for you," she said. "I have also written a little contract. If you will sign it I will give you the notes. And please do not stay too long."

"I'll stay as long as I like," he snapped out. "Where's your blooming contract? What's it for?"

She handed him a half-sheet of notepaper. On it was written:

On receipt of the some of 500£ I promise to abandon any claim at all upon the boy Benny and I agree never to make myself any further black-male.

For name.....

Bowman burst into a guffaw.

"'Pon my soul, that's some contract! You ought to have been in the law, Jackie. I'll keep it as a curiosity."

"Sign it, if you please," she commanded with a stamp of the foot. "There is ink on the table."

Bowman put the paper into his pocket.

"Don't talk rot!" he growled. "Where's the money?"

She showed him the bundle of notes.

"Where did you raise it from? The chap who's backing you, I suppose. Wonder what he'd think if he could see you and me hobnobbing together like old sweethearts, what? Come on, my dear. You have n't kissed me yet. Put your arms round my neck. I can do with lots of affection from a pretty kid like you."

She kept him off.

"Do not dare to approach," she cautioned. "My lips are consecrate."

"Consecrated, are you? That's rich. Who to? The blighter with the money-bags?"

Although she had but a vague notion of his meaning she resented it.

"Do not anger me," she chafed. "Here is the money. Count it if you wish and sign the paper and take your hook."

She held out the bundle of notes, so that he could not help seeing a great pigeon's-blood ruby encircled by brilliants that glowed on the third finger of her left hand. He pounced on it — the hand, not the notes. Those he was indifferent to now. They fell in a scatter on the table.

"Who gave you that ring?" he fulminated. "What the blazes do you mean by thinking you can go and get engaged without asking me? Take it off. Do you hear?"

Jackie went white to the lips.

"Bowman, if you do not take the money and go I may do something infuriate," she cried.

"I'm becoming infuriated, too," he vociferated, and in his rage swept the bundle of notes clean off the table. "Take off that ring, I say, or I'll do it for you! Damn your money! I can do without it for the present. I've changed my mind. I've altered my price. Listen . . ."

XXVI

THE table was a small one. On the flat of his hands Bowman leant across it until his face was close to hers. His tawny, bloodshot eyes reminded her of a beast of prey.

"Listen," he said again, and his voice shook with passion. "You can keep your blasted money! I'm going to have something that money can't buy, I'm going to have revenge! I'm going to marry you *myself!*"

She stood stock-still, speechless.

"I'd half a mind to tell you so three days ago. I did n't because I'm not the marrying sort. Don't think I'm laying my heart at your feet or any sloppy tosh of that kind. Nor I don't want to marry you for your face. I've known how to get all I want out of women without binding myself down. I'm going to marry you simply to stop any one else pegging out a claim to you. You belong to *me*. That's why you've got to take that ring off!"

"You must be quite mad!" she exclaimed, putting her hands behind her. "I am already fiancée. That I should become the wife of a sort like yourself! Oh, it is absurd!"

"Absurd or not, that's what you're going to be. *I'm* going to be your husband, not any half-baked swell without an idea in his chump of a head except front-row stalls and suppers at the Savoy. Come on, now!"

With a quick movement he wheeled the light table out of the way. Jackie darted behind an armchair and seized a china vase.

"Do not approach," she cried, "or I smash this at the window so that assistance shall come. If you intend a pleasantry it is a detestable one. I would kill myself before I would marry you!"

Her earnestness made Bowman hesitate. The last thing he wanted was a smashed window and a commotion to follow. He stood watching her, considering his next move.

"All right," he said. "Kill yourself if you want to. It would n't help Benny much. I'd have him then for sure. Strikes me I'll have him anyway."

The assertion, made with well-simulated confidence, deceived her. She gave an ejaculation of dismay. Bowman turned it to account.

"Look here," he went on in a more conciliatory tone. "I did n't mean to rush you. I dare say it sounds a bit sudden. Overwhelmed you with joy, I expect." He grinned horribly. "I won't say more now. You can come out from behind that chair. I'm not going to hurt you. I won't even kiss you. But" — his voice became threatening again — "what I've said I stand by. It's either Benny or you. Which is it to be?"

The artfully contrived dilemma kept Jackie speechless. Bowman took her silence for submission. If she had to choose she would, he firmly believed, sacrifice herself. He believed she had chosen already, but, like the little spitfire she was, would not admit it. It did n't matter. He preferred talking to listening — talking was his trade — so he continued:

"All right. You need n't answer now. Time enough when I come back. That'll be to-morrow night or the next. Meanwhile I'll see about a licence. You won't want to be spliced in a church, I take it. Can't quite see me in one, eh?" The inappropriate contingency made him facetious. "Like Old Nick in the house of —"

"Tais toi, scélérat!" she burst out. "Make a mock of me if you will, of my heart and all that I love, but do not dare to make a mock of God!"

"Tut, tut! You're mighty pious for a gay girl. You ought to be thankful to me for wanting to make you an honest one. But there! that's me, a bally philanthropist. Sure proof I shall make you a model husband. Well, well, I'll fix the wedding day, so all you need do is to get ready for it. And no double-cross business, mind! If you're thinking of stealing a march on me by getting your fancy boy to marry you before I can get back, you'll be doing it at Benny's expense. I'll take it out of him at compound interest. On the other hand, if you marry me I'll give you my solemn oath — in writing if you like — that I'll never so much as try to see him. I shall get all the fun I want out of you. I'm going now. Say good-night like a good little girl."

"I will never marry you — never, never!" she muttered furiously, as she left the protection of the chair. "Are you not afraid to make so many people to hate you — to have enemies all the time? I myself have never thought wickedly to any one until I have met you. But I wish you were dead! I wish that I was strong to kill you! I wish that some enemy of yours who has strength may kill you yet. For you are too bad to live!"

Bowman grinned complacently.

"I'll try not to disappoint you, my pet. But I take a lot of killing, as you ought to know."

With a rapid movement, too unexpected for her to evade, he pinioned her in his great arms and wrenched the ruby ring off her finger. Then he pushed her from him so that she fell back into the armchair.

"I told you I'd take it off if you would n't," he said, with a chuckle. "I want it for the size of your wedding ring. Now you can go to bed and dream of the happiness in store for you!"

"Canaille! Give me back my ring!" she shrilled, and bounding out of the chair ran at him in a mad rage.

"Now, no tantrums," he warned, keeping her off.

Beside herself, she flung herself on him, fighting desperately to regain her ring. It was the most sacred thing she possessed. Hardly knowing what she did she snatched a small comb from her hair, a blunt-edged thing of tortoise shell, and struck at him with it. It only grazed his wrist, but it roused the devil in him too. He shot out his fist and sent her spinning to the floor, and without troubling to see whether he had hurt her or not took his departure, leaving her dazed and bruised where she had fallen.

She lay for minutes sobbing with rage and pain before she stumbled to her feet. The tears relieved her surcharged feelings and cleared her brain. When they ceased she was calm and able to think.

Benny's operation was to take place two days hence. Had it not been so imminent she might have told him of Bowman's brutality and so got his permission to allow her to appeal to Mervyn for help. But that, alas, was not possible now. Benny's mind must be kept serene and free from anxiety. The only thing left was to gain time, to try to put Bowman off until Benny was better, and then run away somewhere and hide — in Paris, perhaps — where Bowman would n't be able to find them.

That she should marry him even to save Benny was preposterous. In that demand he had overreached himself. To save Benny she would have bartered everything she possessed, but not herself now that she belonged to Mervyn . . .

It resolved itself into pitting her wits against Bowman's. Next time he came she would let him think she had consented to marry him. . . . She would get her ring

back as well. . . . She would be diplomatic. . . . She would hide her hatred and abhorrence. . . . She would pretend to be docile. . . . In her tempestuous state of mind she could get no farther than that — to put him off and gain time . . . to gain time and put him off . . .

Before long the blessed buoyancy of youth came to her aid. She had confidence in her ability to fool Bowman. She would not let him spoil her happiness any longer. She would not even think of him.

She went to her bedroom, undressed, prayed at her shrine, and last of all placed the light that burned in front of it before Mervyn's photograph on her bed-table, so that she might see his dear face if she woke up or if that bad man, Bowman, figured in her dreams.

XXVII

THE day after Virginia's final rupture with Marlbury she left Portlington House and took a suite of rooms at Claridge's, where she intended staying until the divorce petition was through. If by that time Irene was married she could then return to America and there in her maiden name pick up the threads of her old life again.

Wounded pride and a sense of failure weighed her down. Her dignity, often amounting to arrogance, was no longer a support. She quite realized that Marlbury had had very little out of his marriage bargain. In fairness she could not blame him for cutting adrift at last. His nature demanded love and companionship which she could not give. The news of their separation, which by now had become common property, had given her food for reflection and time in which to see the whole unfortunate situation in its true perspective. She alone had failed.

Marlbury beyond dispute had given her a deep and true affection. She had not cared for him at all. Of course she had loved Sam. She loved Sam still. Ambition and the desire for social prestige had outweighed that love. Therein had lain her blunder, her sin against herself and Marlbury. For now she had to admit to herself that it had been a sin. She was young when she married him, barely twenty-two, but she was worldly-wise enough even then to know that he could never inspire a wisely affection in her. Even ten years ago she had felt the disparity in their ages to be too great to admit of their being real chums. It need not have been so. Here again she did Marlbury an injustice. He was over twenty years her senior, but he had the physique and enthusiasms of a young man. The

four years of his active service were proof of his fitness, endurance, and spirit. She had marvelled at his determination and admired his grit. To do her justice she had no notion that her cold indifference had made him careless of his safety. If it was his luck to stop a bullet — well, she would be spared his distasteful company in future. That had been his thought.

The alliance had been a mistake from start to finish — her mistake. Ten uneventful years of her life had passed in a round of social engagements; mere emptiness. Ten years of Marlbury's life had gone in fretting and hoping for what it was not in her to give him. The end had been inevitable. It was a wonder and perhaps a pity that it had not come sooner.

Before she placed the whole unfortunate affair in her solicitor's hands she had the grace to write Marlbury a letter. In it she expressed contrition for the havoc she had made of his life and sincerely hoped for his happiness in the future. Such as they were, the few lines came straight from her rather cold heart. She could never become reconciled to him again, but she knew her own shortcomings and regretted them.

Virginia took Irene with her when she closed Portington House and conscientiously continued her chaperonage. In her way she was very fond of Irene. The girl had filled a gap in her life. She had been a handful, but she was essentially lovable, and Virginia, who had starved herself for love, wanted the little that was left to her.

Irene's willing presence helped her in another way. It gave her courage to face the approaching legal ordeal. Now that she had withdrawn her opposition to Irene's marriage with Grandison no friction existed between them. Indeed, Irene's attitude towards Virginia was

sympathetic. She did not altogether blame her father, but she was also extremely sorry for her stepmother.

It was about 3 P.M. Virginia, nerve-racked after a long morning's interview with her lawyer, was resting on a couch when Irene came into the room. There was something odd about her. She was all in white, but not the simple white of a summer day frock. Her dress hinted at something bridal. She went up to Virginia and kissed her in a self-conscious way.

"Please don't be angry with me, Virginia. Wish me happiness," she said.

She held out her left hand. A bright new wedding ring was on her third finger.

"I did n't mean to do it without telling you," she said apologetically. "I know how you wanted me to wait and have a proper wedding. . . . But, Virgie, we'd waited five years already. It's a long time. And Grandison wanted me so. Love is the best thing in this world. The war has taught us all to make certain of it while we can."

Marlbury's own words in his daughter's mouth! Keenly aware of their underlying verity Virginia remained silent.

"You're not angry, Virginia? Don't think I've been indifferent to your wishes. I do care. You've been a real dear to me always, even when you felt you had to be angry with me for my good."

Virginia sat up and kissed her. Her eyes were moist. Love! Yes, it was a good enough prize to gamble for. The knowledge had come to her too late. She must have been signally lacking in the gambling instinct, the courage to stake her happiness on love alone.

"Of course I wish you every happiness, dear," she said. "It's true I hoped you would have waited a little longer. But perhaps you know best. After all, your happiness

ought to come first. . . . Only, I shall be awfully lonely without you, especially now."

"But I'm not going to leave you altogether. We wanted to make sure of one another, that's all. We're going away for a little while, and then I'll come back if you'll have me till you sail for America."

"When were you married?"

"An hour ago. In a dear old tucked-away church in the middle of Covent Garden. So lovely and quiet, no crowd, no fuss. Mervyn gave me away."

So Mervyn had been in the secret!

"He'll be here soon," Irene went on. "He's got some news for you, too."

Virginia thought she could guess what his news would be; something to do with the French girl.

Irene sat down at the foot of the couch.

"Virginia," she said, "will you think me dreadfully rude if I say what's in my heart? It's about you. . . . Well, I'm going to. You've been awfully sad lately. More so than you'd admit. I've seen it. It's made me sad too — all this trouble with Dad, I mean. I don't know all the rights and wrongs of it. I don't want to. But I've thought lately that perhaps you never loved him to start with. If that's so it was hard luck on you both."

"Yes," said Virginia.

"Well . . . it's not Dad I'm specially troubled about. He's struck out for himself — chosen his own way. But you've got years and years in front of you. You're not really much more than a girl."

"Thirty-two," said Virginia.

"That's young. I hope with all my heart that you'll marry again — somebody who loves you and whom you can love. You'd be the dearest thing if you'd only be yourself, just your natural self. We've only one life so

far as we know. It seems so queer and foolish to shut one's eyes and heart to all the promptings of the soul — the dictates of nature." Irene's face was rosy. "Oh, my dear, I'm lecturing you! Forgive me. I suppose it's because it's my wedding day. But you *will* let yourself be happy, Virginia, won't you? The chance is sure to come."

Virginia smiled sadly.

"I had that chance once," she said, giving way to the first burst of confidence that had passed her reserved lips for many a day. "It came to me just before I married your father. . . . But I turned my back on it."

Irene had guessed as much. She would have given a great deal to help Virginia to be happy again. She felt her happiness to be something of an affront to one who had so completely missed her own.

After a little more talk she said good-bye. Virginia felt the parting. Life just now seemed to her to be made up of nothing but partings. But for Mervyn's intended call she would have indulged in a fit of weeping. She felt near enough to tears.

Mervyn and she had scarcely met since her unfortunate encounter with Jackie at his flat. He came now expecting her to be inimical, especially after the pronounced way in which he had abetted Irene's marriage. That, he supposed, would add to her ire. To his surprise he found her quite friendly, almost affectionate. She reproached him for not having come to see her more often.

"I'm of a retiring disposition," he said, whimsically. "And I'm not partial to offering sympathy where it may n't be wanted."

"You think I can do without it?"

"Well, you seem to have washed your hands of all of us, Virgie."

Virginia sighed. "I shall be lonely now that Irene's married," she said.

"I hope you've forgiven her."

"Of course."

"And me?"

"And you. I think I've forgiven everybody, even Marlbury."

The unexpected change in her sentiments delighted Carter.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said. "Family jars ought to be fitted with shock absorbers. What I really came for was to — er — tell you —"

"Something about your young French friend?"

"How on earth did you guess?"

Virginia spread out her hands. "When your name, by implication, is associated with hers in the newspapers, and Irene buys her a trousseau —" She paused.

"You assume?"

"That, like Irene, you are gambling — on love."

"No. I'm not gambling. I'm investing in love, Virgie."

"You are married?"

"Not yet. But my little Jacqueline is promised to me."

Virginia turned this over in her mind. After a little while she said:

"I went to see her performance. She is a great success. You're proud of her, I suppose."

"Very proud."

"Does she come of any stock? Is de Brie her real name?"

"Poor little soul! As far as I can gather her whole family were practically wiped out in the war. I believe the *de* was conferred on her by Calderon, her manager." A smile twitched his lips. "Titles are going cheap these days." He suddenly remembered that she was about to

relinquish hers. "I did n't mean anything personal, Virginia. After all, Carter is a steady, solid name. When you've gone back to it you'll be your old self once more."

"I wonder," said Virginia. "And Jacqueline? Without the prefix Brie is quite as good as Carter, anyway."

This was a concession from one of such aristocratic tendencies as Virginia. Carter gave her a grateful look.

"I should like to meet her again," she went on.

Carter could hardly believe his ears.

"To apologize," pursued Virginia. "I must admit I was very rude the day I met her. As I'm going to be her sister-in-law I suppose it's up to me to make amends. Will you take me to see her one afternoon?"

Carter reached out and nearly shook Virginia's hand off.

"You're a brick, Virgie!" he declared enthusiastically. "I never dreamt you'd take it like this. I've done you an injustice. I made sure you'd talk about misalliances and bad bargains and give me the cold shoulder."

"I've known trouble lately, Mervyn. It has opened my eyes to my own blunders. I've come to the conclusion that I've no right to criticize any one who has the courage of love. I know now that it's the one essential to matrimony. Unfortunately I found it out ten years too late."

The sorry admission stirred Carter's pity. But Virginia had not been fishing for pity. She took a queer pleasure in humiliating herself. It was her way of holding the scales even between herself and Marlbury.

"You don't blame Marlbury, do you?" she asked.

"I can't judge. I think he should have stuck to you."

"He wanted to. It's only fair to him to admit it. He did his duty by me and I did n't know how to treat him, or rather I did n't want to know. He was awfully patient, and strictly honourable. I deserve what I've got. I'm

not an injured wife. I feel more friendly towards him than I ever did before. And yet I hope we shall never meet again."

A speculative look came into Carter's face. Virginia had always been something of an enigma to him. He wondered whether she was like the ice-maiden in the fairy-story who at last turned to flesh and blood at the kiss of the fairy prince. But where was Virginia's prince? Sam? She had always thought him "a clod" and she had turned him down. That romance was dead he supposed. The chances of bliss that occur so frequently in fairy-tales were always at long odds in real life. Carter sincerely hoped that the future held happiness in store for Virginia. He was fond of her. Still, he did n't think it likely she would find love or marry again. Although she had unbent about Jackie her frigidity would always cramp her feelings.

For all that, he left her in a buoyant mood. He promised to arrange an early meeting. That she should want to make amends to Jackie pleased him immensely.

Virginia had nothing to do but to sit and think. Her enforced idleness went against the grain. She had cancelled all her social engagements. It would have been intolerable to subject herself to the scrutiny of curious eyes or to the commiseration of friends. The lack of occupation made her realize how very lonely she was. In the past she had hardly ever been at home. That this should have been a grievance of Marlbury's was comprehensible to her now. The emptiness of her life jarred on her.

But all these depressing reflections were suddenly swept away. One of the hotel servants entered her room with a card. The name engraved on it set all Virginia's pulses leaping. By what astounding coincidence had this

one person — this most welcome of persons — managed to turn up at such a moment . . . ?

She was on her feet, her hand out, conventional words of pleasure at meeting him again on her lips, masking her real feelings. Last time she had seen him, nearly eleven years ago, he had kissed her . . . kissed her good-bye on the lips. . . . Those years had not changed him much, outwardly at any rate. Sam was still the same big-shouldered, kind-faced man she had loved, but whom she had not thought equal to satisfying her social aspirations. What had he made of his life? He did not look as though he had fretted greatly. Of course he'd got over it all long ago. Men did.

He took her hand and held it in both of his. It was cold, but did not a cold hand argue a warm heart?

"I had to come and see you, Virgie," he said. "I thought you'd like to know I've made good at last. It's been slow work, and of course I don't blame you for not waiting. But I'm not going to talk about the past. Gee! You've altered a lot, little lady. You're a great personage now, are n't you? You look it. You remind me of a beautiful, pale princess. You make me feel kind of trembly all over like a kid on Fourth of July."

"What brought you to England?" Virginia asked. She also was feeling "trembly."

"Why, just to see you. I said to myself, 'Sam, take a holiday; the first you've had for eleven years.' And here I am! I'm sailing again the day after to-morrow. Yes, I said to myself, 'I'll just see Virginia and then come away home again.' It's worth it too. I've been crazy for a peep at you."

He took a seat close to her. They talked of the old days, of their boy and girl adventures, of her first ball and his college days, of their old haunts and mutual friends.

Then Sam had to tell her of his long struggle with fortune and its prosperous if delayed result. Virginia forgot time. Although she listened to his personal story to the sad tune of "What-might-have-been," it was good to have Sam there — Sam in the flesh instead of only in the spirit — a more finished, a maturer Sam — Sam whose love would have been sure enough to gamble on. . . .

"I had some bother to find you," he said. "Looked up the papers, but I did n't happen on any mention of you in the social goings-on. So I motored to Grange Sutton. That's one of your houses, is n't it?"

"It's let."

"So I discovered. Then I travelled down to Blenshay House in Sussex and was told you were in London, at Portlington House."

Virginia nodded.

"And there they referred me to this hotel. Is your town house undergoing repair? I noticed the blinds were all down."

"No, I — I've left it," she murmured. "I'm going to America soon."

Sam looked delighted.

"With your husband? You must introduce us, Virgie. I must try not to bear him a grudge."

"I can't introduce you, Sam . . . I'm going to get a divorce. That's why I intend leaving England . . . directly I'm free."

Sam wondered if he had heard aright. He was too astonished to say anything. But presently an expression that can only be described as one of sheer joy and elation stole over his face and he said:

"Were n't you happy? Has n't he been good to you?"

"Quite good. . . . It was my fault. I've a cold heart, Sam."

Without any conscious effort Sam managed to get possession of her hand.

"Poor little heart, Virgie," he said, patting it. "You did n't give it a chance. . . . We might have looked for the Blue Bird of happiness together — and found it. . . . Tell me." His voice grew soft. "Have you any little folks?"

"None. . . . Have you?"

"Two. . . . A boy and a girl. The jolliest youngsters."

Virginia's heart, that had begun pounding, suddenly seemed to stand still. So he had married! Of course, it was only natural.

"And your wife?" she asked with an effort. "You are very happy?"

"She's a dream-wife," he answered playfully. "I'm telling you tales, Virgie. My kiddies are only dream-kiddies too. I've never married. You might have guessed I should n't. When I'm alone nights, smoking, thinking of what might have been, I kind of vision you sitting opposite me in my bachelor parlour looking so — so at home — as though you properly belonged there. Then the kiddies come pattering out of bed, down to us. One on your lap, one on my knee. The girl's like you . . . I've seen her quite distinctly."

Virginia hid her face in her hands. "Don't, Sam!" she whispered.

Sam got up.

"All right, Virgie. I'd best not. Maybe I'd say too much. You don't need to know what I feel. I told you all about it once, and I have n't altered. Perhaps my heart has gotten fonder, if that's possible. I'm going away back. When you're free and you start for home, send me a cable and the first thing you'll sight in New York Harbour after the Statue of Liberty will be me. I've waited

ten years. . . . Guess I can hold out another six months. But not longer."

He lifted her hands, kissed them, and went quietly out.

And Virginia, ice no longer, was glad this time to have nothing to do but to sit and think. The jarring emptiness of her life was forgotten. Her eyes and her heart were full of dreams. . . .

XXVIII

"So you must be very brave, chéri," said Jackie.

"Yes," said Benny.

His eyes were on the ceiling. To-morrow the operation would take place. Jackie, knowing how much he must be dreading it, had been doing her best to cheer him up. This visit would be her last until the operation was well over. It was that thought, far more than anxiety for himself, that was uppermost in Benny's mind.

"Jackie," he said, "I've done a lot of thinking since I've been here. You'd better know. You're trying to put vim into me, but it's no good. I'm not afraid, only a bit solemn, perhaps. There are things I want to tell you."

"Tell all you desire, chéri. I attend."

"First of all, I want to say, God bless you."

She gave his hand an affectionate squeeze.

"And then, suppose I — I don't get better after all."

"But you must! You will!" she insisted.

"I mean to if I can. I'm not squealing. But I remember you said the other day that if you made a failure in your part at the theatre, and that if I did n't recover, you would n't believe in God the same as before. No, I know you did n't put it exactly like that, but it was what you meant. You must n't look at it that way. If it does happen that I don't get better it might only be God's way of doing what was best, that's all. Last night the pain in my back was extra bad. They gave me some dope stuff — morphia, I think — and I floated off into a kind of waking dream. I had n't any pain. I'd never felt so well since I can remember. I seemed as light as a feather and I was

going up and up ever so easily and softly. Just as I was beginning to wonder where I was, a lady all in blue and gold put her arms round me. I seemed to know her face quite well. She was young and ever so beautiful. Suddenly I remembered where I had seen her before. She was just like your little statue of the Virgin Mary, come to life. She told me I was quite cured. She called me her 'chéri' in a voice just like yours, Jackie. I asked her if I could see you and she said I could, but not just then. She said you knew I was better. Then, somehow, I felt I had n't got a real body at all. I'd left it behind somewhere along with all my pains. And I remembered that sentence in the Bible: 'And there shall be no more pain.' It seemed the most beautiful sentence that ever was written. And I knew it was true! Another thing I knew was that I was dead. But I did n't mind. It was ever so much better than being alive. Such a heavenly feeling! I could move about — everywhere — anywhere — just by wishing it. All the strain and fatigue had gone. Think what that felt like to a chap who never could get more than a hundred yards at a time without wanting to sit down!

"I'm telling you all this so that you need n't be sorry if it happens that I don't get better. I shall be all right, anyway. That's how I think about it, and I want you to do the same. It need n't prevent you hoping I do get better. Perhaps I shall. The doctor says I'll come through all right. There's no real danger in the operation."

"Then do not let us speak of it," said Jackie, decisively. "I do not like the sound of such a word as danger. Think only that in three days — not more — I shall be here once again, and we shall be speaking of all that we will do when you can come away. Now I must go, chéri. They do not wish me to make you a long visit to-day. Au revoir."

The reason she gave for leaving him was only pretence. She had to go quickly or she would have shown the despondency which his morbid imaginings had caused her. Of course they were quite unreasonable. Il parlait à tort et à travers. She was sure he would get well. But she wished he would have more courage.

She drove back to her flat, intending to rest for an hour before starting for the theatre. Audagna was insistent on this point, and she always did her best to comply with it. She had not forgotten Bowman's departing threat to return. "To-morrow night or the next," he had said. For no particular reason she did not expect him to-night; and in the daytime he kept away, probably because she might not be alone. Her dismay was all the greater, therefore, when she found him in her drawing-room. He had been waiting over half an hour, he sulkily informed her.

"Your confounded old woman did n't seem to want to let me in," he grumbled. "She said you'd be going to sleep as soon as you got back. I soon settled her, I can tell you. I suppose you'd given her instructions that I was n't to be admitted. Damn silly of you."

His temper was none the better for a number of drinks he had taken. Jackie had been quick to detect the foul odour of whiskey that he diffused. It sickened her; she loathed the sight of him; all her femininity was aroused. She was more than ever resolved to resist and defeat him, to deceive him.

"I have given no instructions whatever," she said with an air of injured innocence. "I am glad you come now. I have been considering to myself and" — she gave a little shrug — "enfin, why should I hate you so much? You are a very handsome man. Perhaps you would not be so bad to marry after a little while."

Bowman's spleen melted before this unexpectedly

gracious avowal. He had an enormous opinion of his physical advantages. The one thing he was not proof against was flattery concerning them. On the stage, in the form of applause, it was the breath of his nostrils.

"You bet I would n't," he declared. "That's the sort of talk I like to hear. Blest if you're not getting sensible." He held out his arms. "Come and give a loving welcome to your devoted William."

Jackie went to the bell in a great hurry.

"But first let me ring for some tea."

Bowman made a grimace.

"Not for me, thanks. I sent your old woman out ten minutes ago to buy a bottle of Scotch. You ought to keep a drop in the house, kid. That or a bottle or two of champagne. To have only temperance drinks on tap is n't in keeping with *my* idea of a popular revue actress."

His leer and his impertinence in giving her servant orders in her absence made her blood boil. Her foot was resentfully tapping the floor when the woman returned with her purchase, and with a scandalized expression on her face set it on the table.

"Here, missus, give us a corkscrew," Bowman called as she was going out. "And a glass. Ditto soda — or water if you have n't any soda. Oh, there it is, is it? You don't keep your servants up to the mark," he observed when she had left the room. "I shall have to get her used to my little ways. I like my drinks on tap at the side-board all day long. You might try and remember that. Well, here's my love."

He lifted his glass and nodded to her.

"And now before I forget it. I've got to have your full name to give the registrar. I'll dot it down now. Never thought of asking you last time. How do you spell your first name? . . . with a 'q,' eh? What about the *de*? . . .

Righto, we cut the *de* . . . Yes, Brie? I've got that. That's all I want to know. I gave this as my address as well as yours, so we can get married a week from now. I'll run you down to Brighton for the honeymoon if you're a good little girl."

"But I could not be ready so very soon," she objected. "Why should you wish to make such haste? I am not going to run away. Would you not wish to obtain my affection first? That would be more natural."

Her reluctance, perhaps her tone, struck Bowman as inconsistent with the amiable way in which she had received him. He was not too fuddled to be suspicious or to resent opposition.

"I don't care a curse whether you love me or not," he replied, pugnaciously. "And I'm not going to play any waiting game. I have n't got time to fool around. And I don't trust you, either. You seem to have climbed down a bit too quick to be convincing. I was n't born yesterday. Last time I was here you tried to lay me out. No, you've got a week left, Fatima, and it would n't be as long if I had my way, only the regulations of holy matrimony require that I've got to sleep six nights in one blooming parish."

He helped himself to another drink, and his equanimity returned.

"Of course we could do it by special licence. But then you have to get a dispensation from a bishop, and I don't want any bishops butting into my affairs. Still, there's no reason why we should n't be desperate sweethearts in a week. I've taught more girls than one to love me in far less time than that. Time don't count in affairs of the heart."

He strode up to her and lifted her bodily in his arms.

"By gum! I'll learn you!" he muttered. "Jackie, you

little French pussycat, I hate you like hell, but all the same I'm kind of mad about you! Lift up your little mug."

His grip was so tight that she was unable to struggle. He was in no hurry to take advantage of her helplessness. The prolonging of her agony — he could not mistake it — gave him pleasure.

And so Carter, entering unannounced to ask Jackie to come to tea with Virginia on the morrow found them. The sight of Jackie, apparently docile in a man's arms, revolted him. He came to an amazed stop.

Bowman looked at him over his shoulder.

"Come right in, mister," he invited. "Don't mind us."

He put Jackie down leisurely. Then she also saw Carter, and stood transfixed. She could not, dared not, say anything. What explanation could she make without betraying Benny?

Carter remained where he stood.

"Am I interrupting a rehearsal?" he asked, coldly.

He harboured a wild, a bare hope, that this might account for the odious situation and the man's presence. It lasted only an instant. It was incredible to suppose that this sottish, sordid-looking creature could be in Calderon's employment. Jackie's face alone negated the supposition. The look on it was one of guilt. Or was it shame? Carter suffered agonies.

"A rehearsal?" returned Bowman, with a snigger. "Well, you might call it that, p'r'aps." He winked. "She's too shy to give it a name. Yes, a rehearsal for a wedding, is n't it, my peach? You're the first, outside the family, to hear the news, mister. Jackie, why don't you introduce me? Is this your friend, your mounseer? I guess so." Again he winked at Carter. "Glad to meet you, old sport. I got a little business to attend to so I

must be off. So long, kid. Don't forget next week. Now I've got the size of your finger you can have your blinkin' ruby back." He took the ring out of his waistcoat pocket and pitched it carelessly on to the table. "Help yourself to a drink, old bean. Jackie's a rotten hostess. She don't run to the hard stuff. You have to send out for it." He waved in the direction of the whiskey bottle, nodded to Carter, kissed his hand to Jackie, and lurched out, stumbling over a chair on his way.

Carter drew aside to let him pass.

XXIX

CARTER closed the door.

Jackie made no movement. A dull inertia paralyzed her; her face was colourless, that was all. Carter also remained where he stood. He felt he could not move a step farther into the room.

His brain felt seared by what his eyes had just witnessed. They had seen the girl whom he had believed to be innocence itself lying tacitly in the arms of a cad. "Cad" was too mild a word. It conveyed but a tithe of the disgust which the brutish-looking individual had inspired in him. He was offensive, abhorrent — the sort of creature whom a sagacious dog might have avoided instinctively, and yet Jackie was intimate with him!

Everything spiritual in Carter was outraged. He loved Jackie with infinite tenderness, but also with all his manhood. He had idealized her. It was because of the transcendence of this love that he had for so long refrained from avowing it. The intensity of his feelings made the shock he was now undergoing all the more poignant. He felt as though he were the victim of a hideous dream. Could this impassive girl who said not a word, but who continued to regard him with sphinx-like eyes be the same to whom but yesterday he would have entrusted his very soul? What was the secret of those eyes? Was it appeal or guilt? He strove to disbelieve the evidence of his senses.

"Jackie," he said shakily, "for God's sake, tell me what this means? . . . Have you nothing to say?"

At his words her frozen calm, her immobility, melted

away. She ran at him, took hold of him, twined herself round him, looked up beseechingly into his face.

"Merveen! Merveen!" she cried. "Do not speak so to me! Do you not love me? Do you not believe in me?"

The evasion added to his misery. He freed himself from her clinging grasp.

"I want to believe in you," he said. "I'm asking you to explain that man's presence . . . how you came to be in his arms?"

Her eyes fell before his. She did not answer.

"Who is he?"

"I will not tell you his name," she whispered.

"Is he a friend of yours? Jackie, for Heaven's sake, don't shut your lips as if you never meant to open them again! Can't you understand what I'm feeling, or don't you care? What is that man to you?"

Her reply was a slight movement of the shoulders that told him nothing.

"Has he been here before?"

She nodded.

"How often?"

"Twice."

"When?"

"When I am come home from the theatre."

The hour — late at night — was implied. Guiltiness was in the halting words.

"Is he a relation of yours?"

"No."

"Why have you never spoken of him before?"

Her lips shut tight again.

"O my God, Jackie," he burst out, "I had rather anything in the world had befallen me — or you — than to know you are — what you are!"

Whiter if anything went her face, but her eyes blazed.

"What do you say I am?" she cried.

A despairing gesture and a look of affliction were his answer.

"Dieu! Il me croit perfide!" The words were just breathed.

After an aching pause Carter said:

"After all . . . what explanation can there be? I'm not the only man in the world a girl has made a fool of. It's very obvious. . . I dreamt a dream. That's all. Now I'm awake. It's all hideous. . . I will write to you. . . I —"

"Attendi!" she cried, finding her voice. "You believe that I am — not good. I say nothing. Perhaps, as you say, there is nothing for me to explain. It is a misfortune what you have seen. But if an angel came from the sky and told you that I was true, that I am not what you think, would you then doubt me?"

The appeal missed its mark. What Carter wanted, what he hungered for, was something unequivocal, a straightforward explanation of the hideous situation. It was obvious to him that Jackie's intention was to evade it.

"You can hardly expect me to wait for a miracle," he said, and turned to go.

Jackie's voice, intense with woe, made him pause.

"Merveen . . . I am desolate."

He was assailed by a violent longing to turn back, to take her in his arms, to disbelieve what he could not help believing, but his manhood and his lacerated feelings cried out against the weakness. . . Like the actress she was she hoped to retain him by playing on his emotions. . . To give way to them would be fatal. He had credited all the virtues to a girl who made a mock of the first among them. Romance had blinded him to the ingrained

flagrancy of the stage. His case was common enough. He had been infatuated and then fooled!

And for this girl's love he had knelt at night and thanked his God! A girl in years with the heart and knowledge of a harpy! The iron entered into his soul.

"Merveen . . . I am desolate . . ."

He had heard just such another note of golden liquid agony in the voice of Sarah Bernhardt on the stage years ago: a voice equally brimful of desolation, which had brought tears to the eyes of every man and woman in the audience. This girl had the trick of it, too.

With a laugh so mirthless that it made grief vocal, he looked over his shoulder and said:

"I am desolate too."

She had used the word in entreaty; he meant it as relentlessness. In his voice, his attitude, his looks, she saw an end of everything between them — her dismissal. He assumed her to be something far worse than the *garroche* which his sister had called her, assumed her to be guilty because she would not exculpate herself. All her pride was aroused. It grew stronger every moment. Never would she plead now, never explain.

To his last words, the echo of her own, she made no answer. So it was all over! With the opening of the door by which he stood, Merveen, her beloved, would pass out of her life. . . . It opened. . . . It closed. She heard him going slowly along the passage. . . .

But halfway down it Carter paused. He thought he heard her voice calling his name. He retraced his steps and opened the door. She had not moved. She stood in the same spot with her hand to her heart.

"Did you call?" he asked. "I thought I heard you."

"No," she answered dully. "I — did not call . . ."

He could not tell she was lying. Involuntarily his name,

enshrined in her heart, had fluttered to her lips. But she was too proud to admit it. Her heart had called him back: her pride denied the dictate of her heart.

Indecision held Carter. Her piteous expression moved him profoundly. *Was* that look on her face one of suffering, not guilt? *Could* he be sure?

"Jackie," he besought, "if it is possible to explain, won't you do it? My whole world has gone to pieces. *You* were my world. Such a perfect world that it agonizes me to believe it dishonoured!"

"But me" — she struck her breast — "you will not believe! You will not take my word that I am honest without explication of many words which I cannot give. It is *you* who are without faith! For myself I would not think evil of those I love; no, not if I saw with my eyes what seemed to be an evil. . . . Please to go. It is necessary that I become calm before I go to the theatre."

The determination in her tone, her finality, robbed Carter of a last despairing hope. With a heart like lead he left her.

His car was outside. Virginia was expecting him to bring Jackie. He thought it advisable to go to her and make some excuse, though all his instincts were for solitude until he could face the world again with outward calm.

Directly she saw him Virginia guessed that something was wrong. Less than an hour ago he had been in the gayest of spirits. Now care and shock were plainly written in his face.

"What is the matter, Mervyn?" she exclaimed. "You look dreadful! And where is — Jackie?" The name came awkwardly to her lips.

"She can't come," he replied drearly.

"Was she not in? We must fix another day. To-morrow, perhaps."

"It's not that. She was at home. She won't be coming at all, Virginia . . ."

"Don't think me curious, Mervyn, but does she refuse to come because of what I said at your flat?"

"No, no. I did n't mention your name. She does n't know you want to see her. Something has happened to make that impossible. . . . I've just left her. . . . It's all over between us."

"All over?" Virginia repeated blankly. "But Mervyn, tell me what has happened. Was it a quarrel? Can't it be made up?"

He was not ready with a reply. He stood looking out of the window with unseeing eyes, nervously fingering his gloves.

"It's nothing of that sort," he said. "I prefer not to go into details. I — I've been a fool, that's all. She — I . . . oh, it's the usual story more or less. There's another man."

"She told you so?"

"No. But she did n't expect me and I — found him with her. . . . Don't ask any more questions, Virgie. I'll look you up in a day or two, old girl."

Virginia stopped him on his way to the door.

"Don't take it to heart more than you can help, dear. Are you sure it's all quite final? Of course, when I first knew about her and when I saw her, I could n't help showing my disappointment. It seemed such a mistake. And I wanted you for Irene. But afterwards, as you know, I've seen things in a different light. You loved her, and I know she loved you. That first time I saw her I guessed it. She spoke your name in her sleep. Oh, so tenderly! I'm not saying this to try and patch things up. I don't know all the ins and outs of it. As you say, the details don't signify. Only I wronged Jackie once. Are *you* quite

sure you're not wronging her now? I'm convinced of one thing: whatever she is, she's genuine."

"Thank you, Virgie. No, I'm afraid it can't be patched up. It's past mending — quite final. I'm going to try to forget it. In a few months I dare say I shall be collecting fiddles and bric-à-brac again as assiduously as ever. Good-bye."

The will to forget Jackie, like many another resolve made without the ability to carry it out, was beyond Carter's power. In his flat, to which he returned, everything seemed to hold a memory of Jackie. There was the big chair like a gigantic peacock's tail in which she had liked to curl herself up; the couch on which she had lain asleep after supper on the night of her success in "Spatch-Cock"; the Erard grand on whose keys she played five-finger exercises; the vases that had so often held her flowers; the corner of exposed parquet where she often danced. . . .

On one occasion, he being out, she had taken advantage of his absence to construct in his bedroom a replica of the shrine she had made for herself. He had loved her for her simple faith and the pretty practices of her religion. Now the shrine seemed a mockery: she herself was a mockery. . . . The very foundations of his ethical beliefs, of all his canons of faith, were shaken to their base.

In the drawer of the bureau lay her discarded dancing things: the scarf of many colours, the short skirt, the embroidered apron, the velvet corslet bodice. Treasured objects! He opened the drawer and looked at them, seeing her again as she had looked when she danced to the tune of a barrel-organ in the sunlit street . . . how long ago!

The solitude of the flat and the misery in his heart made him restless. He went out again and wandered about

aimlessly until, tired out, he sought his club. There he made a poor pretence of dinner and after it recommenced his perambulations. Without conscious volition his feet took him in the direction of the Diplomats' Theatre.

A life-sized poster of Jackie stared him in the face when he reached it. Her name in the coloured electric fire which had given her such infinite pleasure to behold, sparkled over the entrance. Carter paid for a seat — one in the back row of the balcony. The curtain had been up nearly half an hour. Jackie was on the stage, dancing. In this first joyous act it would have been difficult to imagine her anything else than a serene and happy girl without a cloud on her horizon. Carter, watching her, wondered whether she could ever really have cared for him. It seemed incredible that she could act like this less than two hours after their parting. The smile on her carmined lips seemed so unforced, so spontaneous. There was laughter in her eyes, the spirit of gaiety in every one of her movements.

How could he know that, even as Calowska could dance gaily in spite of shoes soaked with blood, so Jackie, artiste also to her toe-tips, had forced herself to act and dance with laughter on her lips, though her heart was breaking.

XXX

"Is it true?" asked Milly.

"Oh, Lord!" Bowman exclaimed. "One question after another you fire at me and then want an answer to the lot. Just like a woman! What have my private affairs to do with you? If I tell you anything about 'em don't you understand it's simply out of good-nature? Yes, I am thinking of closing down the tour. Why should n't I? Is 'Dead Men's Shoes' my property or yours? The company will be paid up, and that's better luck than happens to a good many on the road. You need n't look so glum. As a matter of fact I've got a purchaser for the whole caboodle — play, scenery, dresses, and props. Most likely you'll all be taken on with them. If you take my advice, Milly, you'll think twice about Measurer. It's he who's going to take the play over. I suppose you heard he'd come into a bit of money unexpectedly. You take him — with my blessing."

"Don't tease me, Bill," she pleaded. "I know all about Mr. Measurer's good luck. I'm glad of it. He deserves it. I wonder he does n't leave the stage altogether now that he's well off. I should. But I've no personal interest in him. You know that. Bill, I hate to ask you — I would n't but for something I've heard — something Dad let drop —"

"Go on. Out with it. The old blighter is always gossiping about what does n't concern him."

"It's not gossip. It's what he heard from somebody whom you'd told yourself."

"Well, what is it?"

"That you go up to London every day because you're going to get married there — something to do with the licence and your being in the same parish as the bride. Bill, say it is n't true! Tell me that some one's just got hold of a silly tale. You're going to marry me. You know you are. You promised in Poole Park that night. You swore by all you held holy that you'd never lie to me or let me down again!"

"Did I?" said Bowman, imperturbably. "Mere figure of speech. Thought a fly girl like you would have forgotten it. I had. I'm not deceiving you, Milly. I would n't be bothered. I might have meant to marry you in Poole Park, but, Lord, that's ages ago! As to my getting married in London —"

Milly jumped to her feet. "It *is* true, then!" she exclaimed.

"Don't get excited."

"To the French girl?"

He gave her a nod. "Next week. Like to be bridesmaid?"

The taunt made her furious.

"You shan't marry her!" she cried. "You're not free. I — I'll kill myself if you do! You know how I love you and that I can't live without you! You know how you've made me care!" Her voice was all broken with emotion. "Is n't my love good enough for you, Bill? There's no one in the world who will ever care for you as much as I do. Whatever you did or whatever you were, even if you were in prison for doing something dreadful, I'd still love you and come to you and — and —"

"Thanks," he interrupted. "I don't intend going to prison that I know of. Funny idea to get into your head. Think I'm going to rob a bank or commit a murder up in London? That's not the idea by a long chalk. What I'm

going to London for is to settle down. So can you if you play your cards well with Measurer."

Milly made an ejaculation of dissent and wrung her hands.

"Oh, well, I have n't got time for scenes. I'm sick of them! My plans are all cut and dried. I'm marrying Miss Jacqueline de Brie on Friday. So that's that."

"Where does she live?" asked Milly wildly.

"Well, that *is* a question!" At first he was not going to tell her, but vanity seduced him into doing so. "She lives at 72, Green Street, Grosvenor Square, Mayfair, if you *must* know. Classy address, ain't it? Next door but one to a lady of title! Don't you start paying calls and throwing vitriol in her face, though. It would n't be the least bit of use. She'd give you as good as she got. Jackie's a customer!"

Milly was torn between exasperation and despair.

"And you mean to tell me — after what has passed between us — that — that you love her!"

"Oh, love! I'm sick of the blessed word. Cut it out. What's it got to do with marrying? I'm not a soft chump like Measurer with highfalutin sentiments. What I want in a wife is vim. Jackie's chock-full of it. That's why she teases me. She's like a pudding I once had at a swell dinner at the Cri. It was called a soopreese — French for surprise, that is — ice outside and burning hot in the middle. That's Jackie — a blooming human soopreese. Keeps you guessing." He stopped to look at Milly in an aggrieved way. "Now what's the matter with you? If you're going to faint, for the love of Mike don't do it on me."

She was tottering with weakness. To disembarass himself of her he took her by the shoulders and plumped her on to the sofa. She had always been delicate, given to

fainting when overwrought, and ever since her return to the company she had been spending herself emotionally.

She lay supine. Her eyes were closed; she hardly breathed. Without undue haste Bowman fetched a glass of water, flicked it over her face, and then in the most unconcerned manner left her to "get on with it." When she came to she'd be certain to treat herself to "a fit of the weeps." He was n't going to wait for that.

So he went off to the theatre and there occupied himself with business for an hour, forgetting Milly's very existence. A surprise awaited him on his way out of the stage-door — an unpleasant surprise in the shape of Sassoni — Sassoni minus his barrel-organ, his wife, his babies, and his stereotyped smile. It had cost him fifteen shillings of much-grudged money to make this journey in the hope of ferreting out the deceiver who had promised to pay him five precious sovereigns for services rendered. It had taken him days of persistent endeavour and enquiry to trace Bowman. Sassoni was a creature who never forgave, or forgot, or abandoned a quest. He was infinitely pertinacious.

Annoyed at seeing him there, Bowman pretended not to recognize him.

"You can't come in here," he said. "No admittance except on business."

"I come-a see you," affirmed Sassoni in a hard voice.

"Oh, have you? Well, who are you anyway? I've no time to waste."

In a steady flow of language freely interlarded with Italian, Sassoni professed himself to be an upright organ-grinder, and that Bowman, on the other hand, was a liar, a deceiver, and a black-hearted Inglese without principle or honour. He wanted his five pounds, and he meant to have them. Rage made him almost unintelligible; but he

was quite intelligible enough for Bowman, who, because of a guilty conscience, would have understood what he meant if he had said it in Chinese.

"Come to think of it, I do remember your ugly mug now," he admitted. "But if you imagine I owe you any money, all I can say is you're dreaming and it's time you woke up. Think I'd promise any one five quid just for an address? You'll be asking me next to take you on as Shylock! You go and tell it to somebody on the Rialto! What's that you say? Wife and kids? Well, you're not the only one. Dare say I shall have some one day, too. You clear off. I'm a man of peace, but if I see you monkeying round much longer I shall send for a policeman."

Sassoni, now dancing with fury, changed his tone. He, too, threatened. He cursed his despoiler. He spat venom at him. Bowman gave him a push. It was meant to be a slight one, but it sent him sprawling. He picked himself up, and muttering imprecations moved slowly off, realizing the utter futility of argument against a man of Bowman's strength and bulk. At the corner of the street there was a public-house. Sassoni turned in, ordered gin, and sat in the window sipping it and watching the stage-door with ferrety, gleaming eyes.

After a while he saw Bowman emerge and saunter down the street. Sassoni swallowed the rest of his gin and followed. Bowman pursued his way to the station. There he took a ticket to London. Sassoni had his return half. He got into the same compartment as the hated one. He made no further demands. He did not even speak. He simply sat opposite the big man who, for his part, seemed as indifferent to the Italian's presence as he was to the fly that alighted on his coat-sleeve.

At London Bridge Bowman got out.

So did Sassoni.

Bowman got into a taxi, directed the driver to a third-rate theatrical hotel — an address which Sassoni carefully committed to memory — and as the vehicle started, leant out of the window, and with a grin and a contemptuous “Catch, Ringlets!” threw a penny — a last insult — right in Sassoni’s path.

XXXI

AT nine o'clock on the morning following Benny's operation Jackie called at the nursing home. She brought with her a great bunch of pale pink roses, the flowers he most loved. She did not expect to be allowed to see him, but she hoped to have a few words with his favourite nurse. That would be the next best thing.

And it was his favourite nurse who came to her in the visitor's room where she waited.

"Oh, mademoiselle," she said, "I was just coming off duty, and, hearing you were here, I thought . . ."

It was not so much the abrupt stop she came to as Jackie's own delicate sensitiveness that made her heart stand still and a cold hand clutch at its strings. She had a dire feeling, gaining in strength every instant, that Benny—a cold and spectral Benny—was standing beside her, not lying in a bed . . . that she would never again hear his voice. . . . Her eyes asked the dread question which she could not bring her lips to frame.

In answer to it the nurse gave a slow nod

"He died at five this morning," she said, sorrowfully. "The operation took place yesterday afternoon. Sir Purton was quite satisfied with it. You had his message on the telephone saying that all was well, did you not?"

"Yes," said Jackie. Her lips trembled. She was stunned.

"After the operation he was rather longer than usual in coming round, but everything seemed all right. When he did regain consciousness he was wonderfully peaceful and happy and quite free from pain. He told me he had had a beautiful dream, and said something about wanting to go

on with it. Patients are often like that. He asked me to give you his love. He had a good night, but at four o'clock I had to call up the house surgeon. His pulse was getting so feeble. And then, in spite of all we could do, he gradually sank. It was one of those unforeseen cases — we get them sometimes — when the patient seems to lose the will to live. It's hopeless then. Sir Purton came round before the end. Everything was done that could be done. He just slipped away."

Jackie turned a face of stone to her.

"Is it permit for me to look upon him?" she asked.

"Yes, dear."

The nurse led her to the room where less than thirty-six hours previously Jackie had been sitting with Benny, anticipating his recovery and cheering him up. She recalled the earnestness with which he had narrated his dream — that dream of a happy death.

Now he lay there, never to speak or move again. God, not man, had cured him. But Jackie could not think of God. Her grief was too intense. She only knew that she had lost Benny, her poor broken doll, her dearest, her last remaining friend.

Dry-eyed, she looked down at him, wondering at the calm serenity in the dead face. It seemed to wear an expression of infinite knowledge, a look of sovereignty.

"He is happy," said the nurse gently. "Mademoiselle, can you doubt it?"

Jackie did not seem to hear.

"Where is God?" she asked in a stricken voice. "He has taken away my chéri. . . ."

She fell on her knees by the bedside. Her desire was to pray, but her heart was dumb.

"I cannot pray," she said, and whispered again, "Where is God?"

The nurse's kindly hand stole over her shoulders.

"My dear, can you look on that boy's face and ask — or doubt? Don't let grief embitter you. If you were as familiar with death as I am, believe me you would be certain of one thing — that there *is* a God, and that there *is* a future life. . . . Benny would tell you so if he could speak. . . . I'll leave you here for a little while. I'll come back."

So Jackie remained with her dead, gazing hopelessly at the still, cold face so like and yet unlike her chéri Benny. She was entirely heedless of the fact that Benny's death meant her release from Bowman. She had forgotten his existence. Benny's loss affected her like a crushing weight. She had so counted on his recovery, made such plans for their joint future — plans free from all fear and anxiety and pain. . . . Now his last words came back to her:

If it does happen that I don't get better it might only be God's way of doing what was best . . .

And then again:

It was ever so much better than being alive . . . all the strain and fatigue had gone. Think what that felt like to a chap who never could get more than a hundred yards at a time . . .

"Oh, chéri," she cried, "give me a heart of tranquillity. . . ."

Even as she uttered the words an assuaging sense of peace descended on her. It became manifest to her that to mourn when Benny had told her not to do so — to mourn when he had won free of pain — was a form of selfishness. Why should she grudge him the joys of eternity because she remained alive burdened with trouble? Why, above all, should she doubt the goodness of God simply because He had seen fit to open the gates

of heaven to Benny? . . . She saw the narrowness of her vision. . . .

"Oh, chéri, forgive me!" she whispered.

She laid her pale pink roses in his hands. When the nurse came back she was ready, reconciled. She had been crying. . . .

When she got home she wrote to Carter. She was afraid that when he knew of her grief he might come, if only out of sympathy. She felt she could not bear to see him now that he doubted and despised her. Though Benny's death absolved her from keeping his secret the desire to justify herself had gone. Mervyn had lost faith in her. She was too proud to sue to him.

This was her letter:

If you have the wish to express sadness for the death of my beloved Benny please do not come to tell it. I know that you also are sad for him, but if you will make a little journey to the hospital you will assure yourself that he has happiness.

Jackie

She had already returned him the notes which Bowman had rejected, together with his engagement ring and a few other presents.

Benny was dead. Her rupture with Mervyn was final. She seemed to have sounded all the depths of desolation.

There remained nothing for her to do but to sit at home. She had not the heart to go out. Later the theatre would claim her. She had no thought of keeping away because of her grief. Doubtless there were others who would have to dance and sing with a breaking heart to-night. She spent hours before the shrine in her bedroom. She did not pray for the repose of Benny's soul. His repose she knew was assured and eternal. She prayed, hoping to derive comfort from the sweet-faced Virgin with the Holy Child in her arms.

Late in the afternoon a knock at her door roused her from the dull lethargy into which she had fallen. Her servant entered to tell her that Bowman had come.

She was too apathetic to care. She went to meet him. The traces of grief were on her face. She had put on a black frock on her return from the nursing home. Bowman made a wry face when he saw her. He always associated Jackie with colour. Black annoyed him. So did tears.

"Hullo," he said, derisively. "Come from a funeral? You don't look very festive. I just looked in to tell you that I'll be coming round to fetch you on Friday morning at twelve sharp. So if you've any special pals you want to invite to the wedding you'd better issue your invitations quick. Don't you go putting on black clothes, though. Suppose you've been weeping for your mounseer Johnnie. Rotten bad compliment to me, I call it, to go into mourning for him. Well, I won't stop now. I'll just take that kiss I was done out of when —"

He was advancing on her, but stopped at her quiet interruption.

"I do not marry you on Friday, Bowman."

"Oh, don't you?" he cried ironically. "We'll see about that. Don't think you can play tricks with me, Jackie. Now or any time. You tried once when you ran away. It did n't help you much. You're going to marry me whether you like it or not, or, as I've told you, Benny will have to pay for it."

"It is because of Benny that you have no more power upon me." She spoke in a dead, level, emotionless voice. "Only for Benny have I made pretence. Now all that is altered. It is finished. You cannot have Benny at all."

"You wait, my girl. You'll see whether I can or not. Guess you don't know me yet. If I don't have

my way with you, I'll break his blessed back for good and all."

"His back is better," she returned, still in that quiet voice. "He is now stronger than you, Bowman." She crossed herself. "He is dead. That is why you can never have him."

For a moment Bowman was taken aback. Was she speaking the truth? If so, then . . . But all girls were liars. Jackie, being a foreigner and an actress as well, was of course a bigger liar than most. A clever trick that — the black dress, the pale face, the tearful eyes. But he was n't to be fooled so easily. In fact he was n't going to be fooled at all.

"You don't think I'm going to swallow a made-up story like that?" he said contemptuously. "A few days ago according to you he was going to get better. Now you say he's dead. You can't kid me like that."

"I cannot make argument. I have told you the truth. If you do not believe me you can make certain for yourself. The address of the home where he was nursed is 99, Wimpole Street. Go there and make enquiry if you wish. You will hear what I have already told you. . . ."

Bowman began to have a wavering suspicion that she might be speaking the truth after all.

"And I will tell you more," pursued Jackie. "When you made threat to hurt Benny unless I would marry you, I had no intention to consent to such a terrible thing. I loved Benny, but to marry you to save him was a price too great. I had but the idea to make a play with you so that you might think I would agree. In that way I had thought to contrive a little extra time in order for Benny to recover and gain strength. Then I had arrange that we should run away once more — to Paris, and there we could have remain lost till you abandoned search. Now,

unhappily, I have no reason to hide. There remains only you and myself, and I am indifferent to you. You cannot harm me. I am Jackie. I don't care."

"I'll make you care," roared Bowman, beside himself with fury and balked desire. "I'll marry you, Benny dead or Benny alive! I've never yet gone without a thing I've made up my mind to have, and I'm not going to, now. You shan't escape me, I promise you! From the moment I set eyes on you that night when you came running into the parlour at the Green Feathers, all blazin' fury and pink spangles, I've been crazy for you. I wanted you first because you were pretty. And when I found you'd made a hit on the stage and might soon be at the top of the tree, I wanted you still more, because I meant to shin up it myself on your shoulders. But more than all I want you because I've promised myself the joy of breaking your spirit. . . . And you won't put me off it standing there looking like a she-cat. I don't care either. I'm Bowman. And I'll marry you on Friday as sure as I'm alive, so help me —"

He raised his fist melodramatically ceilingwards. But neither his rage nor his threats disquieted Jackie now. Again her quiet, level voice interrupted him, and over her face there hovered the ghost of a smile that was the very essence of scorn.

"God will not help you, Bowman," she declared. "And life is not certain."

And Sassoni in Soho, who had betrayed Jackie and in turn been betrayed, moodily brooding, his fingers twitching and feeling for that which lay in the sash around his waist, was waiting for nightfall, and preparing himself to justify her faith. . . .

XXXII

DIRECTLY Bowman went — not without threats that he would return — Jackie began to reconstruct her world.

It was a new world, without a Mervyn or a Benny; a world in which all that was left to her would be her art, her dancing, her life at the theatre. Dancing had once been everything to her. Her love of it had kept her serene and impervious to life's hurts, aches, and abuses, even in the dark days of her exploitation by Madame Lemine. It would have to be all-sufficient again.

Benny's death had been a crushing blow; Mervyn's defection had numbed her senses; yet now, at the end of this first day of tribulation, she was becoming reconciled, for she was convinced that her loss was indisputably Benny's gain. Life could never hurt him now as it was hurting her. It was hard to die, but it was equally hard to live when life was all awry.

There was nothing left for her to do but lift her shoulders in that inimitable way of hers and repeat to herself, "I am Jackie. I don't care," until the reiterated words inspired something of her old spirit of independence. She *was* Jackie. She *would n't* care. Mervyn had lost trust in her and she had lost him. But on that account and because God had taken Benny, was she to lose courage and own defeat? It was not in her nature to capitulate to adversity. She had too much fight in her.

No one should ever know how much she had cared. She would work harder, practise longer at her dancing, live only for the golden opinion of the public. What mattered it so long as she pleased them? There would be

nothing to interfere with her stage career now — no home ties, no love-affair, no marriage.

Mervyn she would forget; marriage she would forgo. Was it not often said that love and marriage were the grave of an artistic career? And if her heart was lonely as the years went on she would adopt a little baby, the prettiest she could find: two babies, perhaps, to be company for one another. Pet animals would not suffice her. Her affections were too human and healthy to be satisfied by the strange idolatry which she had seen other girls lavish on their zoölogical freaks. No, she would have children — little babies to keep her spirit young and sorrow from her heart. She would have preferred that they should be her very own, but as that was not possible, she would have "adopteds." In the meantime perhaps Sassoni's wife might be prevailed upon to let her borrow that most delectable dark-haired bambino. She might forget her sorrows while she was on the stage at night, but there would be many hours in the day when the new loneliness would be almost more than she could bear. It was those hours she must somehow fill.

That night at the theatre she did not know Carter was among the audience. The news of Benny's death had grieved him; her letter had seemed so frigid. Yet he was impelled there to bid her a silent farewell. He had made arrangements with a yachting friend to go for a cruise which was to extend ultimately as far as Japan. It would keep him away from London, from cities and the news of cities for a year or so. In a year he hoped some of the bitterness would be effaced from his heart.

So he saw her once more, dancing as blithely as ever, apparently as care-free as she had seemed on the night following the disastrous scene at her flat. Even Benny's death did not appear to have touched her heart — she

whom he had believed to be all heart. He could not understand, he was not in the mood to understand, that her courageous spirit had risen above her private distress.

This evening, indeed, she seemed to surpass herself. She danced divinely, but when Calderon, with fresh plans maturing in his mind, seeing visions of new worlds for her to conquer, sought her in her dressing-room after the performance he found her sobbing her heart out.

"Why, what's this?" he asked. "I thought our Jackie was the happiest soul in the theatre. I came in making sure of it after watching you from the front. You were splendid to-night. Quite top-hole. What on earth has upset you, my dear?"

Jackie wiped away her tears.

"It was a weakness," she replied sorrowfully. "I would like to dance all night and never return to myself at all. I am desolate, Mr. Calderon. I have lost through death the dearest of my friends, and I am lonely in myself. Please to take no notice. I shall be more calm presently."

The sobs that escaped her were like the little spasmodic gasps of a tired child trying to desist from a fit of weeping. Calderon, accustomed as he was to the unaccountable and sudden outbursts of hysteria which actresses are apt to indulge in, outbursts to which he was usually insensible, for once in a way felt a strong desire to play the comforter. But because of the discordance between an endearing manner and the pursuit of business he checked the impulse and waited until Jackie was sufficiently calm to powder her nose, always in his experience a sign of the subsidence of feminine agitation.

"Come and have supper with me and we'll talk business," he said. "Whenever I have a fit of the blues, which is n't often, I don't take a drink or call in the doctor; I look at my box-office returns. You can take it from me,

Miss Jackie, that the best thing to live for is work. At the worst it only gives you a headache, never a heartache; and it never goes back on you like humans sometimes do. If you stick to business in a reasonable way you won't have any doleful hours. Make work your friend and it'll turn out your comforter. I'm awfully sorry you're in trouble, my dear. Console yourself with the fact that the best artists always have the worst woes. It's part of the make-up. If there were no bumps on the road of life there'd be mighty little satisfaction in getting on to the tarmac."

His philosophy made Jackie feel better. She had not meant to let her troubles show, nor would they have done so if Calderon had not surprised her in a weak moment. He went on talking. He was not addicted to dressing-room chats, but to-night, seeing that Jackie needed encouragement, he gave it her.

"Yes, the best way to take life is to regard it as a prize-fight," he affirmed. "You've got to be game and keep fit. You've got to bring courage and a sporting outlook to it. You may get knocked out, for Fate's a hard hitter, but there's always the chance of another fight another day and a full purse for reward. But it's no good going into the ring with a weak spirit or a flabby body. You've got to keep tuned up all the time. If every man or woman followed the right kind of mental and physical training there'd be very few failures and a lot of overcrowding at the top of the tree of life. As it is, most folk muddle along. The only ones who get there are those who mean to climb, even if they have to hack their way up. If the boughs are in the way they must be got rid of. There's clear sky above, just as there's the limelight for the winner in the ring. I'm talking a lot, Jackie, and my metaphor's getting mixed, but I want to see you

outpoint all the others. You can do it if you keep your pecker up."

Jackie smiled wanly. The spirit of emulation was normally strong in her, but just now it was torpid.

"Mr. Calderon," she said, "I have lost a friend through death. I have also lost love. You have known I was fiancée? Now I have no lover. That is my grief."

"Dear, dear! That's bad. I'm sorry to hear it. Very sorry, indeed. But love is n't everything, though it seems so at the time. I've found that out. Some of us get it; some of us have to go without. I sometimes think that those who've learnt to dispense with it, like getting used to tea without sugar, are the best off. In the end, you get to like tea unsweetened and wonder what on earth you saw in sugar. When I was a very young man I fell in love with a girl, and although I was only in the box-office I built castles all over Spain for her. I told her that, one day, she should have a theatre of her own and be the big screech in it. That's what took me into management. Now I own six theatres, two variety houses, and a stadium. Yes, I was going to put rings on all her fingers and bells on all her toes. But she could n't wait. She married a touring manager in a hurry so as to get the part of leading woman, but she got pneumonia instead and died of it. When I heard the bad news I thought I was counted out. I got in a kind of a temper with Fate then. I stood up again and fought my derndest. And I won through. I've cut love out of my life, and yet I'm not lonely or embittered. I'm a successful man. I've done what I've set out to do. Yes, there are lots of other things in life besides love, Jackie. You'll find that out, and some day you'll come and tell me so. Now if you're ready we'll get along to the Savoy."

So Jackie, instead of returning home, went out to

supper with Calderon. He had been making big plans for her. D'Obusier from Paris had seen her and wanted to arrange with him to star her there. Then there was a similar offer from New York. Theatrical speculators from many lands had seen her Mariette and been captivated by it. Her dancing, her miming, and above all her charm had delighted them. Her professional future was assured. Calderon saw the way to make an international star of her. When the run of "Spatch-Cock" came to an end he would not be able to confine her to revue. Competition for her services would be too keen. The salary she would then command would expand — snowball fashion. She was his discovery, so he proposed to act as her agent. The arrangement would be of mutual advantage. She was not merely an actress of the adequate capacity that can be kept in a groove, one that can be moved from theatre to theatre in revue after revue until she became an institution and a habit. Her success would never be confined to London. Her temperament was far finer than that of most of her English contemporaries. Unlike theirs, her talent would stand the strain of transplantation and the exactions of critical Continental and American audiences. The only danger she ran was that of stagnation. Kept in one groove she might wear thin. Calderon was far-seeing. He meant Jackie to have scope, and through her to increase his own reputation and enlarge his interests. Over the supper table he spoke to this effect, hopefully, encouragingly.

"You're going to be something more than Jackie, a clever little revue dancer at the Diplomats'. You're going to shine in more than one hemisphere; and it's a proud man I shall be when you've conquered both of them," he said in conclusion.

His talk of expansion, above all of travel, fired her

imagination and buoyed her up once more. She might grieve in secret for Benny: not to have done so would have been less than human. But for Mervyn (she assured herself) she would not mourn at all. Like Calderon, she would have no private life, no intimate ties. She would laugh and shrug and dance her way through life. Caliovska had surely spoken the truth when she had said that achievement could be attained only through pain and the renunciation of love. Calderon, in different words, had voiced the same sentiment.

Perhaps all her inflictions — Bowman's threats, Mervyn's mistrust, the loss of Benny — were the dolours through which she was to reach the heights she had dreamt of; only, her gregarious little soul had been unable to resist sharing her dreams of happiness and prosperity with those she loved. It seemed so futile to have ambitions for one's self alone. Something of this she imparted to Calderon.

"Come, come!" he said. "You must n't take such a hopeless view of the future. At your age, too! You underrate yourself and what you can do. Look at poor little Gaby des Lys. She worked hard, enjoyed herself, made a fortune, and left it to the poor. In her life and in her death she did more good than many a millionaire. There's nothing to prevent you doing the same. When you dance it is n't only for a large salary. It does n't end there. You've charmed unhappiness away, if only for an hour, from many a carefilled soul. You've given pleasure to thousands. It is n't everybody who can do that. The lucky people who by art or ability can charm others are the favourites of the gods. You need n't fret, little Miss Jackie; you'll never live for yourself alone. You're bound to give pleasure wherever you go. The Almighty did n't design every woman to make puddings

and do washing. You keep on burnishing up your star. That's what you were meant for, I guess."

Jackie left Calderon feeling greatly cheered. She was resolved to justify herself and his belief in her. Yes, more than ever now would she dance for all the world and be the friend of those multitudes whom she would never personally know. And her dear Benny, now with all space to roam in, would surely watch her efforts with approval. And then, of course, she would have those "adopteds." She had n't mentioned her heart-hunger for little children to Calderon. He might not have understood, for all his sympathetic attitude towards her.

Already her mind was evolving a project which Calderon had set in train. Gaby, that inimitable one, had danced for the poor. She, Jackie, would dance for little children, the helpless unfortunate ones. All her superfluous money should be devoted to the care of maimed children, poor broken dolls like chéri Benny. She would accumulate all the money she could to establish a home for them, the sweet things! There was heart-healing in the thought. And that home should be a loving cenotaph to the memory of Benny. It should bear his name. . . .

Every day of late on returning to her flat its solitude and the unnerving prospect of finding Bowman in it had always faced her. But to-night she was blissfully free from both of these oppressions. On opening the door loneliness did not close down on her; she felt equal to confronting and resisting her blustering persecutor should he be there.

But there was no sign of Bowman. Only a girl whom she had never seen before, — a fair, pale girl with hunted eyes, and a woe-begone expression on her face, — who, as Jackie came in, started up from the chair she had been sitting in, ran towards her, and abjectly threw herself on her knees.

XXXIII

"OH, I thought you were never coming!" she cried. "I went to the theatre, but they would n't let me see you; and then I came on here and I begged your servant to let me wait till you came in. Have you been with him all this time? Where is he now? Are you married yet? Oh, for God's sake, tell me I'm not too late!"

What she meant or what she wanted was beyond Jackie. All she could do was to respond to the trouble in the stranger's voice and face.

"Please to get up," she said, gently. "Do not kneel to me. I think that you do not know me and that you have made a mistake, but if you are distressed perhaps I may help you. That I will do willingly if I can."

"But I do know you!" cried the girl. "I've heard about you often and often. You're Jackie, the French girl. And you've stolen away the man I love. What have you done it for? You can't love him as I do. No one could. But he's crazy for you, and he's left me in spite of all his promises that he never would. This very morning he told me he'd got a marriage licence and that he was going to marry you on Friday. I'm Milly Winter. Don't you remember my father? He plays Walcott in 'Dead Men's Shoes.' Now that he knows Bill does n't mean to marry me after all, he's nearly off his head. He says when Bill comes back he'll kill him, and he'll try to, I know. And I shall put an end to myself too. If you've married Bill, I *can't* go on living. I'd far rather die. I'd far rather —" The words stuck in her throat.

Halfway through the tumultuous statement, half accusation, half appeal, enlightenment had come to

Jackie. She remembered Benny speaking about this girl, and although her devotion to Bowman struck her as incomprehensible, she was sorry for her. She led her to a seat and sat down beside her.

"But you make a mistake," she gently insisted. "If you love this terrible Bowman, who is all badness, it is a calamity. But that you should think I am to be married to him is a delusion. You have said that you would sooner die than lose him. To you I say I would greatly prefer to be dead than to marry him. I have told him so already."

The fair words brought some relief to Milly, but she doubted whether she ought to believe them.

"But you promised to marry him," she declared. "You must have! He said so. You wrote to him weeks ago, did n't you, and told him to come and see you? You won him away from me. I don't suppose you meant to do me any harm. Very likely you did n't know anything about me. But you could so easily make him want you. You're so beautiful. Now I've seen you for myself I don't wonder he never thought anything more about me. But after what I've just said you'll surely give him back to me! There must be so many other people who love you."

Jackie took her hand and stroked it soothingly.

"You are what I sometimes become," she said, "too much stimulate. Your feelings make you to boil over. If you will tell me about Bowman and yourself I will afterwards make my position quite clear. Then we shall understand how we each are situate. At present it is a mix-up that I cannot understand. My poor Benny did tell me that Mr. Winter, who was always so kind to him, had a daughter, but no more. Were you fiancée to Bowman? If it is so, it is a pity, for I think you are good and he —" A shrug expressed what she thought of him.

Milly wrung her hands.

"Bad or good, what does it matter? I love him. Just that. Can't you understand what love is? It does n't weigh things up. It gives without thinking of the price."

Jackie remained silent. She could not bring herself to discuss love with a stranger. Hers had been too recently laid to rest.

"I'll tell you everything right from the beginning," Milly went on. "I was fifteen when dad and I started playing in 'Dead Men's Shoes,' and I think I loved Bill from the very first day I set eyes on him, though it was child's love then. And it was n't because he was nice to me. One night I dried up; could n't remember a single word. Afterwards he sent for me. He was in a fearful temper and he hit me. I never told father. He'd have made trouble. But from that day — I can't explain why — I was Bill's slave. I did n't hate him for hurting me. You won't believe it, but it made me love him more. If I'd been a dog I'd have licked his hand. You despise me for that: I see it in your face. You'd never let a man treat you as Bill has treated me. It's all or nothing with me — body, soul, spirit."

"It is a bad way to love," said Jackie, with a dissentient shake of the head. "Never should it be quite all, not even to a worthy one. It should even be possible to do without."

"Ah, you've got pride. I have n't any. I can see that in the way you look, and the set of your mouth. If your pride was hurt you'd never humble yourself to any one, least of all to a man. I'm different. Perhaps I have n't got much character. Bill says I'm a fool. A sweet fool he used to call me when he was in a good temper. . . . Well, one day soon after he'd hit me he called me into his dressing-room and I expected the same thing — a row

about something or other. But it was n't that. He kissed me. He said he wanted to make up for the last time when he'd been angry. And he called me 'sweetheart.' It was n't child's love I gave him after that. . . .

"For a long time dad did n't see how things were going. He did n't understand I'd grown up. It was six months or more before he had any idea. I did n't care what people said. The women of the company warned me against Bill, and when I would n't listen to them they dropped me. I did n't care. Who in the world did I want or care about except, Bill? I tell you I only lived for him. . . . Then, quite suddenly, he got tired of me. He got to know a girl in the town we were playing in and he neglected me for her. I nearly went mad with jealousy. I could n't kill her, so instead I tried to poison myself. Then dad found out. There was a dreadful to-do, and I was left behind ill in bed. I nearly died. It was weeks before I got better and when I returned to the company I promised dad I'd have nothing more to do with Bill. It was just after you'd gone off with Benny, and Bill had been stabbed by somebody in the night. He always refused to talk about it. I never guessed who'd done it until this morning. It was dad himself! At first I could n't believe it. . . ."

Jackie could hardly believe it either. She had so got it into her head that Benny had attacked Bowman in defence of herself that she had never suspected any one else, Winter least of all. She had to shut her lips tight to prevent herself asking a multitude of questions.

"He would n't have told me if I had n't persisted in coming up to town to-day. I told him why. I said I meant to find Bill or see you and stop your marriage. Then he admitted what he'd done, and in his rage he said he meant to do it again and not fail next time. He's quite lost all control over himself. . . . But I did n't come

here to talk about dad. I can't think of any one except Bill. When he came out of hospital all my good resolutions were forgotten. I wanted him more than ever. At first he would n't look at me, but after a time he changed. One night when we were out walking he promised to marry me; and that's what he would have done, I believe, if you had n't written to him. P'r'aps you did n't mean any harm. Perhaps you found him so fascinating —"

"Fascinating!" cried Jackie. "Mon Dieu! To me he is a man to make one shudder. Now please to listen. You have a misconception of myself. Probably Bowman has lied. Never have I written to him or made a rendez-vous. To this day, I do not know how he discovered where I live. He came to me here. He made a claim to take Benny from me. But he could not find him because he was in the hospital to have a cure. Then Bowman made me threats. First he demand money. I obtain it to rid myself of him. Then he change his mind, and said he will not have money. He will marry me instead. It was madness! Rather would I be married to a Boche! But to make time for myself and Benny to escape I let him think that perhaps sometime I may give in. But when next he came Benny was dead. That was this morning. So my fear of him has gone and I told him to go to the very deuce, and since then I have not seen him. Now that he knows he can do nothing with his persecution he will doubtless abandon it. As for marriage to him, rest tranquil, it is impossible. When he finds it is so he will doubtless return to you. But it is a pity that you wish it. I do not understand how an amiable girl like yourself should become attached to so bad a man. Most certainly he must be the brother of the devil."

Milly did not take offence at this downright opinion. Indeed it set her thinking.

"I've heard father say he is the devil himself." She gave a sigh and went on: "As if that could alter my feelings! Good or bad, I can't help loving him, and I suppose I shall go on loving him until I die — or he dies."

"Then I hope" — Jackie put a deal of spleen into her tone — "that he *will* die. I hoped it at first for the sake of my Benny; now I desire it for yourself. I do not think it is a wicked desire."

Milly ought to have been shocked, but somehow she was not.

"It's no good hoping for anything," she said, despondently. "I don't know where he is or whether he'll come back to me or not. I don't like to think what may happen if he gets back before I do. There's dad. It's impossible to tell what he might n't do in a fit of temper."

"That he should be the one to hurt Bowman outside the summer-house on that night of May is an astonishing thing. If I had known! All this time my poor Benny believed —"

Jackie came to a stop. It could serve no good purpose to tell Milly of Benny's strange delusion and self-accusation. Nor was she particularly curious as to Winter's motive for doing Bowman an injury. She supposed and could easily understand that it was inspired by hatred and the desire for revenge. All the primitive emotions came natural to her. The primitive needs were hers also. One of them was sleep. It was past one o'clock.

Milly intercepted the glance she gave at the clock on the mantelpiece, and hurriedly rose.

"Oh, I did n't know it was so late!" she exclaimed. "Please forgive me for keeping you up. I'll go at once. I must catch the first train back to Haxworth in the morning. That's where we're playing this week. And thank you for being so sweet to me. I — I hated the thought of

you before. I thought you were a cat and everything that is bad. I am ashamed. Now I know you're as good as you are lovely."

She leant forward and Jackie kissed her.

"Where are you going to sleep?" she asked.

"I — I don't know," Milly stammered.

"Then you will stay here. There is room for you with me. You are so tired."

Milly was dreadfully tired, but she had been prepared to walk about the streets until the morning in order to secure this interview. If, an hour ago, she had been told that she would be thankfully sharing the bedroom of "the French girl" she would have rejected such a ridiculous idea.

Jackie too was utterly weary. Her grief of the morning; her angry interview with Bowman; the strain of her performance; and then this long and trying talk, had nearly exhausted her. She could hardly keep awake. To make up the bed in Benny's room was beyond her. Her own was ready. So before long the two girls were dreamlessly asleep in it, and neither stirred until the morning sun filled the room.

Milly was the first to wake. She sat up in bed wondering where she was. Slowly her mind reshaped the trials of yesterday. It took her some moments to realize that she had spent the night with Jackie — Jackie to whom she had come to plead for the return of her lover. Last night seemed ages ago. Yesterday had been all tumult and despair. This morning she felt strangely calm. By some miraculous means the night had brought relief and comfort to her heart. She found herself thinking of Bowman objectively, without emotion of any kind, quite dispassionately. Where love had been there was a blank, something wiped out, as though it had never

been. In its place was a sense of freedom, of returning pride.

Had her nature and her heart undergone a change in the night while she slept? It seemed so. Every moment she was more sure of it. One outstanding fact kept hammering on her consciousness. She did not love Bowman any more. She did not want him. She no longer existed for him. Spiritually, mentally, physically, his domination over her had ceased. Something evil had been removed from her life.

Her sudden comprehension of this change was accompanied by another feeling, ominous and yet relieving. The two intuitions were complementary and they explained the mystery of the alteration in her. Together they gave her the sense of certainty. She *knew* what had happened. Every instant she became more assured of it.

Bowman no longer existed for her because he no longer existed for himself or any one else. He was no longer alive. Somehow, somewhere, he had died while she slept!

A merciful Providence had given her back her heart — the untainted, girlish heart that Bowman had stolen, trampled on, and despised. . . .

XXXIV

SASSONI'S wife was setting her room in order. Her brown face wore an anxious look, for Pietro had been absent all night. The last time that had happened there had been trouble. The police had come, asked many questions, and gone away reluctantly. This time they might come and perhaps not go away without Pietro. At ten o'clock last night he had left the house saying he was going to play cards with a fellow Italian. He was an inveterate card-player, but he seldom stayed out after midnight. Yet midnight and early morning had not seen his return. Perhaps he had had a quarrel over the cards and he or another had used a knife. Yesterday, she remembered, Pietro had been sharpening his. Also he had been cantankerous. All the afternoon and evening he had not been able to sit still. These signs in him had taught her to be apprehensive.

Apathetically she swept the dirty floor, attended to a number of small birds in cages (Sassoni was something of a bird-fancier), fed her children, and set Sassoni's breakfast in readiness on the hob.

Somewhere about seven o'clock he came quietly in. He was unkempt, with the look in his face of one who has been drinking heavily.

"Dio mio!" cried the woman. "But what has kept thee? I have done nothing all night but repeat Aves for thy safety. Hast thou fallen among enemies? Or hast thou an illness?"

"Shut thy mouth," he commanded. "I was but collecting a debt last night." A slightly amused distortion of his lips indicated that he had done so successfully.

"Well, have thy meal while it is hot."

Sassoni shuddered at sight of the food, rose from the chair on which he was sitting and with gorge rising went outside. His wife nodded to herself. It was evident that he had taken too much to drink. He came back demanding coffee — black as his soul. She brought it to him, a little doubtful now whether the results of inebriation accounted for his ill-temper. There was something else. Yet she dared not ask questions. The hot coffee seemed to do him good. Presently he was able to tackle his breakfast. When it was finished he pushed the plate away, leant back, took something from the sash at his waist, and threw it across the table.

"Clean that."

Her eyes went fearfully to it, to him, then to the door. She thought of the police.

"Pietro," she whispered, "what hast thou done?"

"Cleaned a rabbit yesterday," he answered with an ugly laugh. "What else? One would suppose thou didst think I had killed a man. What if it were the blood of a man? Only a doctor could tell. And not at all in two minutes when the blade is bright. Do as I tell thee. Make it clean."

She departed submissively, and after a while brought the weapon back speckless and burnished. Sassoni picked up the baby and dandled it on his knee, giving it the hilt of the knife to play with, guarding the blade. His wife watched his doings with alarm. At last she said shakily:

"Pietro, I am cold with fear. Hast thou verily killed a man?"

Sassoni did not turn his head. He was regarding his youngest-born thoughtfully. One day that tiny hand would be strong like his own, a man's hand, powerful

enough to wield the knife which now lay heavy in its feeble grasp.

"There was once a man," he rejoined, abstractedly, "who was rich. He had fur on his coat and gold in his pocket, and a motor-car in which to travel at his pleasure. And it so fell out that this man made a bargain with an honest man who was poor and the father of children. The rich man promised the poor man five pounds for a service that he could render. After a time, the poor man faithfully discharged this service and the hour for his payment was appointed. For many hours he waited, but the rich man did not come back. He had no thought of payment. He was a cheat, without honour. The poor man became wroth. At great expense he was forced to make a journey in the hope of obtaining his money, but when he reached his destination the rich devil laughed at him and struck him and threw one miserable copper piece at him as a last insult. So the poor man made a vow to pay back insult for insult and blow for blow. And now, as I speak, he is avenged. The debt is collected. See."

He thrust his hand into his trouser pocket and drew from it five crumpled notes.

"And I am no thief," he declared magniloquently. "In his pocket there was money enough to take us to Italy and establish us. Also his watch and chain were of gold of good weight, and there was a ring of value upon his finger. But none of these did I touch. They who find him will know that he was not robbed. I do not rob the dead. I am an honourable man."

He chucked the baby under the chin and gave it one of the Treasury notes to play with in place of the knife-handle. So he sat for a little while and then, his sickness having passed away, he washed, and changed his coat and sash.

"Come now," he said briskly. "Put the little one in the basket and let us depart."

His wife stood cowering.

"Darest thou show thyself in the street?" she queried apprehensively. "If the hand of the law should fall on thee as we play the music! Art thou entirely without fear?"

Sassoni squared his shoulders.

"I have nothing to fear. I went, I came, and no one saw. Thou, thyself, knowest nothing of the man on whom I am avenged. How should the law discover anything? Unless I were to tell thee and thy fool's tongue talked too much," he added as an afterthought. "But if I were accused by the law I would speak openly of my vendetta and say what manner of a man he was whom I have justly slain. In the war that is past I killed better men, though they were pigs of Austrians, and was praised for it. This man was worse than a pig. He died too quietly. I do not think he felt pain, which is to be regretted."

"But who was he?" curiosity made her ask.

Sassoni had told her all he intended — just enough to make her uneasy and spoil her sleep o' nights.

"I would sooner talk to a parrot than a wife," he replied flippantly.

In the street he took the cover off the piano-organ, adjusted the basket between the shafts for his bambino, and signed to his wife to start.

"It is a thousand pities thou hast the feet of an elephant and cannot dance," he grumbled, surveying her with husbandly depreciation. "That *nichilità*, Jackie, would have made our fortune. There is more worth in a monkey with mange than a wife who is as heavy as thou."

They trundled the organ along, Mrs. Sassoni harnessed like the beast of burden she was, in front, Sassoni push-

ing behind. Sometimes his efforts were not conspicuously energetic.

To-day for his own reasons he did not follow his customary route. He played in streets little known to his wife, and in time came to a standstill before a house off the Strand. One of its several doorplates inscribed (without any apostrophe) TOURING ACTORS CLUB showed that somewhere within the itinerant Muses revelled when not on business bent.

With eyes uplifted to a row of windows whose blinds were drawn Sassoni set the organ going. It gave out a blast of opening chords and then settled down to a boisterous syncopated movement that fulminated riotously from wall to wall of the street. Faster and faster went the handle. It was Sassoni's *io triumphe* to the dead — the dead, up there behind those drawn blinds, who could tell no tales.

Very soon a policeman emerged from the house. He made a gesture that stopped Sassoni in mid-bar and caused Mrs. Sassoni's knees to shake with fear. But he only smiled at the pair. He enjoyed seeing piano-organs and Italian folk about old London streets again. It was like the good old times before the war. He even found a penny for the baby in the basket, and patted its curly head. Then he addressed Sassoni, who had not turned a hair at all this attention.

"Move along, sonny," he said genially. "There's a dead man indoors. Don't seem quite commy-fo to play dance tunes under his window, more especially as he's been done in. Go a bit farther down, there's a good chap."

Sassoni showed his comprehension of the tragedy by vigorous nods, his sympathy for the victim by mournful sighs, and then considerably moved on.

XXXV

WINTER's hands holding the morning paper shook visibly. An appalled look was in George Measurer's face as he read over his shoulder. They were absorbed in the same paragraph, a report of Bowman's murder outside the Touring Actors' Club. The deed had been committed too late at night to permit of anything but a brief report, but such as it was, it affected them both indescribably.

Bowman, whose identity had been established by papers in his pocket as well as by the evidence of several members of the Club, must have been fatally stabbed as he was leaving the premises a little after midnight. He had been discovered, lying on the pavement in a pool of blood, almost immediately after the attack and carried upstairs to one of the club rooms, but had expired before medical help could be summoned. An aspect of mystery surrounded the case. The motive of the crime had apparently not been robbery, for a considerable sum of money and various valuables were found on the deceased man. So far, the police, who admitted to the absence of clues, had made no arrest.

The paper dropped from Winter's nerveless fingers. He turned a scared face on Measurer.

"Milly!" he gasped. "She went up to town — yesterday — to — to try to see —" He could get no more out.

Measurer was naturally aware of Milly's absence, but he had not known where she had gone or for what purpose. Winter's unfinished sentence told him. Of course she had followed Bowman to London. The ominous fact filled him with consternation.

"Where — with whom was she staying?" he stammered.

"I don't know." Winter wrung anguished hands. "I'm afraid — horribly afraid! Why is n't she here? She promised to be back by an early train." He looked at his watch. "It's ten o'clock. If it was n't for that devil she'd have been at home now. He's dead, thank God, but he ought to have been put out of the way years ago. The harm he's done! If he'd come back I'd have killed him myself. I was waiting to do it. I was, by God! Some one else was ahead of me, that's all."

His voice was raised in wrath and hatred. Measurer did his best to calm him. He could make allowances for Winter; himself had no liking for Bowman; but the man had already met his fate, and he was thinking of Milly.

"She's sure to be back soon," he said as hopefully as he could. "Meanwhile, don't let your feelings carry you away. Best not to let anybody know them. I expect the police will come down here to make enquiries. If I were you I should n't let them know about Milly being in town. Her name need n't be brought into the affair at all. But if you go about talking it may."

"Yes, yes, I know. You're quite right. You're a good chap. I'll remember what you say. What I'm afraid of is that when she gets back and hears what has happened to Bowman she'll do something desperate. Then the whole story of his blackguardly treatment of her and her infatuation for him will come out."

He continued to argue in this despairing strain until Measurer tactfully headed him off it. There was another subject of prime importance to every member of the company except Measurer that required consideration. Bowman's death meant that their living was at stake. Measurer had not concluded his negotiations to take over

the play and now might not do so. He spoke of this, and Winter listened listlessly. He was in the grip of a dull fatalism that made him indifferent to the affairs of this world.

Milly's quiet entrance put a stop to the one-sided conversation. She had walked from the station. In spite of Winter's preoccupation he could not help noticing the tranquil look in her face. Twenty-four hours ago she had left him in a frenzied state. Now she seemed quite calm and collected. There was a little colour in her cheeks, and her eyes were clear and untroubled. He could not understand it. To disturb her apparent tranquillity and inflame his own feelings by plunging into the catastrophe that had overtaken Bowman was more than he was equal to. After a moment of nervous vacillation he got up.

"You tell her," he murmured to Measurer, and left them together.

Obvious as her father's agitation was it did not appear to disturb her. This was not like Milly, as Measurer very well knew. It made the unpleasant task before him additionally difficult. There was an exchange of greetings, constrained on his part, while she was taking off her hat; then picking up the newspaper he said:

"Won't you sit down?"

Milly dropped into a chair.

"What is it?" she enquired, unruffled.

"Something very unfortunate," he stammered. "It will upset you. I'm awfully sorry, but you've got to hear it. It — it's about Bowman. Something — dreadful has happened to him."

"I know. He's dead."

"You've seen the papers?" He spoke eagerly, relieved at her impassivity, believing she had already read of the tragedy.

"No. Why?"

"Because it's in here. Did somebody tell —"

"Let me see it," she interrupted, with her hand out.

"Wait a moment, Milly. I'd rather tell you first. It's not pleasant reading. I'm afraid you don't realize yet what has really happened. He did n't — die naturally."

"Was he murdered?"

She put no emphasis on the words. Measurer, unprepared for her inexcitability, was bewildered by it.

"Then somebody did tell you."

"No. I seemed to know all about it when I woke up this morning. I told Jackie so. The French girl, I mean. I went up yesterday on purpose to see her."

"Not to meet Bowman?" he demanded.

"Oh, no."

"You have n't seen him, then?"

"Of course not."

"Thank goodness!" he exclaimed, more to himself than her.

"I'm so glad I went. Jackie was so sweet to me. I'd been told that she was going to marry Bill. But it was n't true. He's been treating her worse, if possible, than he treated me. I found out all about him. I know now how blind I was. I can't understand myself."

"You mean that you don't think about him — don't care any longer?"

"Not only that. I'm ashamed I ever did care. Oh, I can't explain it! May I see the paper now?"

This time he did not refuse it. While she read it he could think of nothing but the extraordinary change in her. It might mean so much to him. For that, apparently, he had to thank Jackie, whom he had frequently heard of, but had never seen. And that reminded him. Could this

Jackie have been in any way connected with the mystery of Bowman's end? He asked the question.

Milly put the paper on the table as though she took no great interest in it.

"Oh, no," she replied. "She and I were in bed asleep when it must have happened."

He was glad of that assurance. After a short silence he said:

"I don't want to say anything uncharitable of Bowman now he's dead. And yet until yesterday I suppose he was the only person in the world I had a grudge against. Not on my own account, but yours, Milly. I could n't help loathing him because of the way he talked about you. He used to make my blood boil."

A flush came into Milly's face. She looked down.

"Mr. Measurer —" she began in an undertone, but stopped at his ejaculation of protest. "Well, George, then. You'll think I'm absolutely heartless. You know — they all know — how I let him trample on my feelings. I don't — I can't deny that I hoped he'd marry me. The only excuse I have is that I was very young and he was the first man who ever made love to me. And yet now — although it's the solemn truth, and you'll find it hard to believe — I have no regrets that he's dead. All I feel is relief and — and thankfulness that he can't influence me any more."

"I think you heartless? No, Milly, you need n't excuse yourself to me. Indeed you need n't excuse yourself to anybody. I've seen all along how you've been victimized. I think everybody in the company has. I can't tell you how glad I am to know that you've got to see it yourself at last."

"I saw it before I knew anything about what is in the paper," she put in hurriedly. "I'm quite sure now that

even if he was n't dead my feelings would have utterly changed. It came to me — a sudden revulsion against him — as I woke this morning. I believe now that what I thought was a hurt to my heart was all along only one to my pride. It was such poor pride that I did n't know I had any," she finished, almost inaudibly.

Tears, penitent, self-commiserating, reactionary tears, stood in her eyes. Measurer could not withstand their appeal. He took her hand.

"You've undergone an ordeal, Milly," he said feelingly. "But it's over. There's a good time coming."

"I — I'm so lonely," she stammered.

"You shan't be, if I can help it. Won't you let me? You know I care for you, Milly dear, although you don't know how much. Won't you give me a little hope?"

He waited anxiously while she wiped her tears away.

"How can I?" she murmured. "Would n't the memory of what Bowman used to be to me always be in your mind? How could you help looking down on me on account of my past?"

"A man does n't look down on the girl who happens to embody his ideal," he protested warmly.

"But I'm not fit to be anybody's ideal!" she cried piteously. "It's true I'm not as bad as one or two unkind women in the company have tried to make out, but all the same I've been weak and foolish enough to deserve contempt. Even my father was scornful of me for being so weak and making myself cheap. I don't understand — I've always wondered why you've stood by me and been my friend all through it. You've treated me with a beautiful respect that I've not deserved. It's what only a good girl ought to expect. And I'm not good. No girl who would let such a man as Bill make love to her and then throw her over could call herself good. No, don't

stop me. It helps me to own myself in the wrong and repent of it. I feel I ought to, because of what you just said. I've no real excuse for myself. My conscience tells me so. I've been wicked and I ought to suffer for it. I can't put all the blame on Bowman —"

But he did stop her.

"Don't let us speak of him any more," he begged. "I can forget him absolutely, just as you have. I only want to think of what you may one day be to me, Milly. I want to do so much for you and your father, if you will only let me. I can run a company of my own and give you the leading part. Your father must n't work any more. We'll send him to some place where he'll have a chance to get his health back. What do you say, dear?"

"How good you are!" she said humbly. "But I can't let you do things for us. I believe I could care for you; but I could n't bear you to think — what everybody else will — that I married you to benefit myself, or even dad. As for the stage, I would give anything to leave it. I hate it! I have n't the ambition of the girl who means to get on. I've never felt the fascination of it. I've seen too much of its unpleasant side — its struggles and make-shifts — the aspect all the people who live and die touring in second-rate companies get used to, though most of them loathe it as much as I do. You have n't had time to do that. You don't really belong to the profession. You're a gentleman. To you the stage has only been an experience. If I were you, not dependent on it, I would buy a lovely little cottage somewhere in a village where all my neighbours would be my friends. And I'd marry a loving, good wife, and have dear little children, and go to church on Sundays. That's my idea of perfect happiness."

In disparaging the stage Milly did not know she was giving Measurer an incentive to leave it. This expression

of her feelings and the comparison between a theatrical life and a quiet country one, so unfavourable to the former, stirred him like the still small voice of conscience. She was near the truth in esteeming his connection with the stage merely an experience. It had brought him much disillusion. She could compensate him for that, however. Her eyes and her voice assured him of it. So without further hesitation he took her in his arms and she did not repel him.

"It's my idea too — with you to share it, Milly," he said.

"Oh, my dear, I don't deserve it," she murmured abjectly.

Winter, returning just then, looked at them in stupefaction. He had expected to find Milly draining her cup of misery to the dregs. And there she was with an expression of entranced bliss in her face, and Measurer with the look of an accepted lover.

Turning, Milly saw him — the father so frail and woe-begone who had loved and mothered her throughout her childhood; whose heart she had well-nigh broken. . . .

With a little cry of penitence and love she left her lover's arms and ran to him, hiding her face on his breast.

XXXVI

THE bell tinkled and Madame Lemine, more obese than ever, waddled from her dingy parlour into the shop. Not so very long ago it had been one of Jackie's tasks to keep it dusted. Now dust held undisputed sway there. Otherwise it showed little alteration.

Jackie took in the familiar scene at a glance. On the left, just by the door as you came in, there was the dummy figure clothed in faded brocade alleged to have been worn by Beau Brummel. The material was ostentatiously of German make; its cut that of the Minorities. Along two of the walls coat-stretchers displayed an anomalous variety of faded fancy dresses. The same wigs, a little more the worse for wear if anything, stood on blocks on the counter. Between them was the same showcase of stage jewellery. Jackie recalled the beating that Madame had administered to her for dressing up in some of these things, decking herself with paste diamonds, and dancing in them at the corner of Wardour Street. This she had done to gain coppers for flowers for a dead baby in the vicinity. More coppers than she expected had been forthcoming, but they had only gone to swell Madame's till. Nevertheless here was Jackie, bearing no malice for thumps and disappointments, come to pay her a visit.

Madame came forward peering uncertainly at the pretty face beneath a wide-brimmed, richly caparisoned picture hat. What could a young lady of such fashion want of her? No one so obviously of the moneyed world had crossed her threshold since that spring afternoon when a gentleman had come to make awkward enquiries about the devil-child, Jackie.

"Madame, are you not delighted to see me?"

Jackie spoke in French, and her voice with its well-remembered cheeky timbre nearly startled Madame Lemine out of her senses.

"That voice!" she exclaimed. "But surely it cannot be Jackie?"

The plumes in Jackie's wonderful hat nodded vigorous assent.

"But yes. I am Jackie and I am come back to thank you, Madame, for my early training. Without it I should not have arrive. At least so soon. Before long I shall have made my *début* in Paris and then in America. So I said to myself, go visit Madame in case before you can return she has died of apoplexy, being so fat!"

Jackie's eyes twinkled. In this environment of her early pains and pranks she could not resist being mischievous.

"But in truth, Madame, I have come to render you justice for those lessons. The groundwork of technique was in them. Audagna has said that from them I gained much. Therefore I am grateful, even for the beatings when I made mistakes."

Madame Lemine took a breath so big that she reminded Jackie of the frog of the fable, inflating itself.

"Decidedly it must be Jackie," she puffed. "What other would possess such impudence? But how passes it that thou art dressed of such an elegance? And what is this talk of a master like Audagna? Where hast thou been since thou didst leave these tender arms?"

Jackie made an amused grimace. All the tenderness she had received from those elephantine arms had been revealed in discolouration of her own slender ones.

"Come into the little room and I will make you coffee and tell you all my adventures," she said.

So once again, at the back of the shop, as in days of old Jackie made delicious coffee in a saucepan as only a Frenchwoman can, boiling it up three times and clearing it afterwards. She placed a steaming cup before her old taskmistress.

"There, I have forgotten nothing," she declared, and sat down in the chair by the window where it was possible to breathe a little fresh air. And as is the way with all those to whom time brings anæsthesia she forgot the worst of the unkindnesses and blows she had received, and remembered only the rare moments of well-being under Madame's roof.

In her own picturesque language, which was French in construction and English in spirit, she gave the old woman a sketch of her career from the day when she was carried off by Bowman. Madame drank in the narrative. It sounded to her much more like a feuilleton out of the "Petit Journal" than a page of real life. And yet Jackie had left out a great deal. Not a word of her inmost soul did she reveal and she did not mention Mervyn. That was an incident, an interlude, something too beautiful and now too sad to talk about.

When she had finished she opened her purse and laid notes to the value of fifty pounds on the table.

Madame's eyes gleamed. Business had not been flourishing with her of late. For some time now gout had so crippled her that she could no longer teach dancing. She had disbanded her "adopteds." Very few of them had turned out good investments. Jackie might have done so in the end, but . . .

And here she was, holding money in her hands. For about the first time in a hard-working, not too fortunate, and avaricious life Madame was inclined to believe in the goodness of human nature. What else but goodness had

brought this maddest of children, Jackie, to offer her money out of gratitude for the blows that had been rained upon her?

"But what is this?" Her swollen, gouty fingers closed on the notes. "For me?"

"Yes, for you. It is for my maintenance during my adoption and my dancing lessons. But principally it is as recompense for the money you should have obtained for my services. Now I render it to you. Please to accept it."

Tears welled into the old eyes and trickled down the wrinkled cheeks, making a furrow in the grime that lay upon them, thick as the undisturbed dust in the shop. The old voice lost control of itself. All quavering, it called down blessings on the head of the donor — her little one, so generous and so considerate. The clients did not come to shop now. The stock was threadbare. Nobody wanted instruction in dancing. And, for the rest, how could an ancient one crippled with rheumatism and gout give any?

Jackie brushed aside Madame's thanks, and consoled with her on her misfortunes. She was genuinely sorry for her old tyrant.

"Have courage, Madame," she cried. "Am I not here to give you assistance? Count on me. From Paris or wherever else I go I will send you money. Am I not rich — rentier? Shut up the shop and the business. You shall not want."

The shop bell tinkled as she spoke. Habit sent her to her feet to answer it.

"Restez. I will go," she said, and went into the shop.

A young man stood there. His pleasant face was clean-shaven; his well-cared-for tweed suit had seen better days. Jackie recognized the type, that of the provincial actor. With much hesitation, due to the surprise which

her appearance created in him, he desired to know whether he could be provided with a child artiste for the afternoon. He had seen the notice in the window. He wanted a dancer. It was an urgent matter.

"I am sorry," she said. "Madame does not supply artistes now. She has become too indisposed to train them. Perhaps if you go to the theatre agents in Covent Garden they will assist you. I do not know their names, but doubtless you could ascertain."

The young man made a despairing gesture. He seemed to be in trouble of some sort.

"I've been to them all. They've nobody I could engage because of the terms they ask. Unfortunately, I can't afford to pay much. That is why I came here."

"I am sorry," Jackie repeated as he was about to go.

Something in her voice stopped him, a compassionate note that he had not expected, any more than in this dingy shop he had expected to be attended to by a beautiful girl dressed in the height of fashion. The wonder and a look of hopelessness in his face as he turned it to her again made her quite sure now that he was in trouble.

"I shall worry through somehow, I suppose," he stammered. "I'm doing an open-air pitch on the sands at Southend. A portable show, you know. A morris-dance style of thing, with my wife for partner. But yesterday the poor girl was suddenly taken ill. The doctor says it's serious. . . . Well, I must keep the show going somehow, even if I have to dance by myself. If they won't stand that" — he laughed mirthlessly — "it'll be a case of begging in the streets. . . . But it's a bad lookout — for her. I'm sure I don't know why I'm telling you all this," he said, apologetically. "Something in the way you said you were sorry, madame, I suppose."

"Your wife, what age is she?" Jackie enquired.

"Twenty-two."

"And her illness? What is it?"

The young man coloured. "She's in bed. Must n't get up."

A look of comprehension sprang into Jackie's face. "Oh, but — !" she exclaimed and broke off.

"Thanks very much. Good-bye," he said after a pause, and lifting his hat went towards the door.

"Wait," Jackie called.

He came to a stop, looking back.

"Would you like me to dance for you?"

"But — can you?" he asked, nonplussed, yet eagerly.

Jackie nodded.

"Professionally? . . . Really! . . . But I — I don't quite understand . . . And if you're a professional you'll of course want to be paid." The hopeful look of a moment ago changed to one of despondency.

"I do not ask for payment. And I can only dance once — this afternoon. Will not that be better than nothing? To-morrow you may engage a dancer for always."

He advanced again to the counter.

"You mean it? Seriously? You'd have to catch the one-thirty from Liverpool Street. That would give you time to get down to the beach and dress. I shall have to go by an earlier train to get things ready. We open at three o'clock. The west side of the pier. You'll see the name — 'The Moriscos' — on the fit-up. You can't miss it. My real name is Chester. But I have n't thanked you yet. I don't know how to! It's simply splendid of you!" His face expressed a sudden doubt. "It — it's rather like looking a gift horse in the mouth, I'm afraid, but *are* you really experienced?"

Jackie's lips twitched with amusement. "No, I have not much experience, but all the same I can dance. I am one of the dancers in 'Spatch-Cock.' Is it enough?"

"Great *Scott!*" Amazement was in the exclamation. "Enough? It's too much and to spare! A dancer from 'Spatch-Cock' in a fit-up on Southend beach! You — you'll keep the tide back!" His enthusiasm changed to something approaching awe. "Why, you must be first-class! I've heard that all A. B. C.'s people are up to Russian ballet form! And you're going to dance for me! Why?"

"As a little help for your wife who is — in bed," said Jackie awkwardly. "It will be a pleasure."

"I'll tell her that," he murmured in a queer voice. "She'll be tremendously grateful — and proud. But what about a dress? She's much taller than you. I'm afraid her things would be hopeless."

Jackie set his mind at ease about the dress and dismissed him, almost jubilant now, with a solemn promise to catch the one-thirty train. Then she took farewell of Madame Lemine, cheerful again by reason of her unexpected windfall of fifty pounds, which she likened to the *gros lot* of a small Montmartre lottery of five-franc *abonnements* to which she was addicted.

It was just upon midday. Jackie drove to the Savoy, where she ate a quick lunch standing amidst the sea of empty tables, holding voluble converse in French the while with the *matre d'hôtel*. From there the taxi took her to the theatre and away again with a bag containing a couple of her costumes and a pianoforte score of "Spatch-Cock" to Liverpool Street station, where she caught the Southend train with five minutes to spare.

Nothing could have pleased her better than this suddenly planned adventure. She was glad of the opportunity

of helping any one in distress. In doing so she helped herself. The distraction did a little to allay the fever of her own crushed hopes. Poverty and suffering never appealed to her in vain. She pictured the actor's young wife in pain, disabled like her poor Benny: another broken doll. Oh, yes, by her art she could help in so many ways! Had not Calderon said so?

She located the little theatre on the beach without difficulty and found Chester waiting for her in the canvas doorway. He looked tremendously relieved to see her.

"I'm ashamed to say I was half afraid you would n't come," he said. "It seemed too good to be true! I hope you won't mind this primitive dressing-room. I was just going to chalk up an announcement on this board and then remembered I had n't asked your name. What shall I put?"

"Jacqueline de Brie, from the Diplomats' Theatre, London."

The reply disconcerted Chester.

"But I — I can't do that," he objected. "It might get you into trouble. Suppose some one —"

"But do not suppose," Jackie interjected. "I am veritably Jacqueline, and I dance to-day for your sick wife, my friend."

The amazing truth staggered him. He had assumed her to be one of the actress's dancing supporters, not her very self. He stood helplessly gaping at her. Jackie took the chalk from his fingers and filled in the board with her name. Its effect there pleased her nearly as much as the electric sign over the portico of the Diplomats'. Chester's eyes were brimming as he carried it round to the front. There he heavily underlined the three words and wrote beneath them — *For this Occasion Only*. Never had he felt so elated and yet so humble.

Before long a small but curious crowd gathered round the board. Jacqueline, the new and famous dancer of London, to appear in a booth on the sands! This was surely a hoax. But the small crowd swelled into a large one. The news spread. Soon every atom of space on the roped-in plank benches was packed to suffocation. People stood in serried ranks behind them; even the esplanade above was lined with spectators.

While Jackie dressed she and Chester through the canvas wall arranged their programme. By tacit consent the morris-dances were cut. They might have been a variant of the *can-can* for all Jackie knew. Chester proposed to confine himself to a pianoforte entertainment: songs and patter after the customary model, and not spoil Jackie's dancing by sharing it with her. He was proficient at the piano and he knew the tempo of most of the "Spatch-Cock" music. Certain numbers of which he was not quite sure Jackie hummed to him. It was probably the highest-speed rehearsal on record.

Yet when the curtain was hauled up by a local stage-struck boy, who for sixpence a day was glad to associate himself however remotely with the drama, everything went with smoothness. Chester, stimulated by excitement, was in happy vein. His audience were in the best of humour when he struck up the number chosen for Jackie's entrance. They applauded her frantically. That she was no pretender was manifest to many among them who had seen "Spatch-Cock" in London. They had no time to consider the why and wherefore of her appearance in these modest surroundings; they were wrapped up in her performance.

And on that tiny stage Jackie, adapting her movements to its limitations, danced their hearts away. She improvised, she invented; she gave a fascinating display of her

art in miniature. For an hour at frequent intervals she came and went; and then heedless of Chester's expostulations went amongst the delighted audience with a soup plate and collected largesse. Money flowed. The plutocracy of Hackney and the Mile End Road were in generous mood. The plate soon brimmed over. There were notes as well as silver in it, to which, unobserved, Jackie afterwards added a lavish contribution of her own.

On the station platform, where Chester, overjoyed and almost stupefied, went to see her off, she would listen to no thanks.

"Ne vous gênez pas, mon ami," she said. "It is nothing. Not so long ago I was dancing to a piano-organ in the street for pennies. To-day it was pleasure, not work. Give my love to the little madame and my best wishes for her quick recovery."

Chester stood hat in hand, his heart in his eyes, till the train passed out of sight.

That night between the acts at the Diplomats' Calderon came into Jackie's dressing-room with a face as black as thunder.

"What's this I hear?" he demanded. "It's going the rounds that you've been seen busking on the sands at Southend! Dancing to a penny crowd and taking round the hat! Is it true?"

"Quite true," she replied, regarding the effect of a pencilled eyebrow in the glass.

"But what for? Why?"

"Why not?"

"Good God! Do you think I pay you a hundred a week to make an exhibition of yourself in a hole like Southend? You're engaged exclusively to me. At this theatre. You can't appear anywhere else without my permission. And you go and make yourself cheap on the beach at Southend

of all places! It's enough to spoil your reputation and damage mine. You must be mad!"

"Calm yourself. It was not madness. It was for charity and a little diversion. The artist I wished to assist had a sick wife and no substitute. So I took her place for an afternoon, that is all. It was a total success."

"That's no excuse." The enormity of her offence made him lose his temper. "I won't have it! It must n't occur again! You can't give freak performances just where you like. It's a breach of contract. You've made yourself legally liable to dismissal."

Jackie bounced out of her chair.

"You would dictate in an affair where my heart take me?" she fired back. "Your contract! What is it to me? I make it! I will myself break it if I choose! If I can benefit an unfortunate I will do so any time I desire. I am Jackie! I will do what I like! I do not care! I will say good-night to you, Mr. Calderon. And if you anger me I will not dance for you any more at all!"

She flounced to the door, palpitating with passion.

Calderon, who full of righteous wrath had come expecting penitence, stood agape before this counter-attack. The outrageousness of Jackie's *tu quoque* confounded him. It was like an unexpected right hook that puts the receiver "to sleep." His managerial authority petered out. What was he to do with a fiery little devil who for a whim would tear up contracts and forfeit her future? Appalling thought! His ire cooled on the spot. This explosion would be a lesson for him. He would be careful not to excite another like it. Jackie was n't a normal girl. He had been an incarnadined fool to think he could treat her like Claudia Day, a creature without a temperament. Better let Jackie go her own gait so long as she only followed her heart. He was n't going to risk losing her for an amiable

indiscretion. Hang it all, he'd rather eat humble pie. He caved in unconditionally.

"Oh, bless that heart of yours, Jackie!" he cried. "Come back and make it up. Forget what I said. I apologize. Dance wherever you like. In the moon or Mars or across the Milky Way. But I'm going to manage your star, whatever it is!"

Jackie smiled, laughed, forgave — and came back. With fairy-footed lightness she sprang on to a chair and dropped a butterfly kiss on the bald spot on Calderon's head.

Her sovereignty was complete.

XXXVII

THERE was an atmosphere of ripe dignity and subdued splendour about Sir John Grandison's studio. Its spaciousness was not impaired by the museum-like redundancy of objects of art usually affected by fashionable artists. A few fine specimens of French furniture, Bayeux tapestries, and silken prayer-rugs on the parquet floor did not overcrowd it. A large model throne, a paint-cabinet in Chinese lacquer, and one tall easel were its only professional adjuncts. No litter of stacked canvases, sticky bottles of medium, dirty palettes, and discoloured brushes drew attention to the owner's occupation. The only picture to be seen was one on the easel, a narrow, full-length portrait of Jackie in dancing costume.

Irene Grandison stood before it with her hands clasped behind her back giving it a long, contemplative scrutiny. She had seen it grow from its early roughed-in stage, during the long period of its development, until now, when it was all but finished, and she had never tired of studying it in all these phases.

Throughout the sittings Jackie had presented Grandison with a problem that would have been the despair of an artist of less ability than himself. Her sense of the dramatic and her artistic perceptions had suggested a pose which she had held to perfection. Rather was it a poise, such was its suggestion of imponderability and resilience. Grandison had reproduced this to the life. It was all movement and it had all Jackie's physical grace. But until a little while ago her face had baffled him. Its play of feature was as changeable as the skies. His difficulty had been to seize on any one of its fleeting aspects. In the end

he had caught what seemed to him to be its fundamental expression, an enduring wistfulness of the eyes.

This expression Irene was now intently observing.

"John dear," she said, "it's amazing! It's going to be the picture of the year. I believe it's better than the Carmencita, because it's all movement. I keep on feeling that in another moment she'll spring out of the canvas."

"Had n't you better get out of the way, then?" Grandison chaffed. He was lying at full length, smoking, on a gilded *chaise longue* at the other end of the studio. "It takes a Nijinsky to catch her in midair!"

"But —" Irene paused, not quite sure of conveying what was in her mind.

"But she won't. Is that what you were going to say?"

"No. It's her expression I was thinking about. Do you know, there's something about it that's just the littlest bit not quite like Jackie. She looks as if she might burst into tears."

Grandison nodded to himself. He was glad to have it confirmed that he had caught the look of elusive wistfulness with which he had been confronted for so long.

"I've never seen her look really sad," Irene pursued. "I don't believe she could be for more than two minutes. Even her break with poor old Mervyn did n't have that effect on her. At least she never shows it. If I had to describe this picture I should say it was that of a fairy with a soul that was hurting."

"You would n't be far out, old girl. That sad look is always in the back of her eyes."

Irene walked across to the *chaise longue* and sat down at the foot of it.

"Strange I've not noticed it before," she said.

"I only got it in yesterday."

"You must have a sixth sense to have seen it. I'm

sure she is n't worrying about Mervyn as much as I am. Is n't it strange that he does n't write? Virginia has n't had a line from him since she left England. We can't imagine where he is. Is n't it a pity? It looked as though he and Jackie were going to be as happy as we are. But that's all over and done with now. I wonder which of them was to blame? I've never questioned Jackie, but I really think it's time I did."

During the morning Jackie came to give Grandison a last sitting, and in an interval for rest Irene bore her off to her own room. Of late Jackie had exhibited an almost feverish gaiety. She seemed to do nothing but frolic all day and dance half the night. She had won an assured position in the public esteem, and to the world in general her life appeared to be as *allegro* as the music to which she gave such *plastique* on the stage. Success had not spoiled her. She played with fame as a delighted child plays with a toy. She went everywhere. She was almost as much paragraphed as Royalty and a great deal more photographed. She was becoming an arbiter of fashion, especially the fashion in hats. The "Jacqueline" hat of tenuous structure and overwhelming brim topped by a riot of brilliant plumage was all the rage. There was also the "Jacqueline" shoe, a high-heeled, half-slipper-like thing encrusted with imitation gems. Calderon, expert in the science of advertisement, had, of course, engineered most of this publicity. Jackie took it all as to the manner born, but without pretension. To outward seeming she trod a path of roses. She seldom spoke of Benny, never of Mervyn. Both had epitaphs engraved on her heart under little white crosses.

After a general talk Irene said:

"Jackie, before you came in Jolin and I were discussing your portrait. I told him I had never seen the sorrowful

look he's put into your eyes. Is it really there? Let me look. No, I can't see it. If your eyes tell anything it's that you're just glad to be alive, and that's all."

Jackie pursed her lips in playful protest.

"Oh, but no, Irene! I am not so selfish. My heart is full of consideration for others as well. It has grown so big. I love all the world."

"But not anybody in particular? How about Mervyn? You did love him once, I know. Don't you care whether he's safe and well, alive or dead?"

The question brought a fleeting spasm of pain into Jackie's eyes. Irene saw it come and go, and she knew now that Grandison's vision was deeper than her own.

"I have tried to make him dead to my heart," Jackie answered, soberly. "Why should I speak of it? If I cut my finger deeply and it bleed, do I go to every one and show my wound and say, 'See how fast the blood flows'? I do not like the sight of the blood myself. So I bind it up and say nothing."

"Then you *do* care and you're pretending all the time that you don't! Oh, Jackie, why? Did you quarrel? Was there a misunderstanding? You and Mervyn were simply made for one another! I'm sure of it! Won't you tell me what the trouble was, my dear?"

"I will tell you, but it is no use," Jackie replied, with a heavy sigh.

And for nearly half an hour she opened the mausoleum that was her heart, lifted the little white crosses, and showed Irene the grievous relics that lay beneath. It was a long story. To extenuate herself and to make her attitude towards Mervyn convincing, she had to go back to her first meeting with him in Soho, and so through all the tribulations that Bowman had brought down upon her. She flayed her loyal little heart in insisting that her pledge

to Benny had imposed on her the seal of secrecy, so that even when all the evidence of Mervyn's senses was arraigned against her she had not dared to break it.

When everything was told an obvious question jumped to Irene's lips.

"But," she exclaimed, "when Benny was dead why did n't you immediately go to Mervyn and make a clean breast of everything?"

"For one thing, because I am proud!" A little flash of indignation, the first she had shown, came into Jackie's face. "When that day Bowman had me in his arms and Mervyn suddenly arrived — Oh, Irene, if you could but have seen the way he looked at me! If you could but hear the name he called me! He had no more trust in me — me, Jackie, who adored him! That is why I could never afterwards go to him and kneel for forgiveness. He would not have believed. I had seen it in his face that day. But also I was not free from my promise to Benny until Bowman was dead, and that did not happen until Mervyn was far away. Even now, though I am free to speak if I wish, I would bite my tongue instead." Her voice shook. "He would not trust me!"

"But he would now — if he knew what I know!" Irene declared. "Try and make allowances for him, Jackie dear. Think how he must have felt! How he must have suffered! Oh, if I only knew where he was! To write and tell him how mistaken he was, and that you are blameless! . . . Wait! I have an idea! The yacht he went away on belongs to a friend of my father's . . . He's in Paris." She jumped up, seized note-paper and a pen. "I'll ask him who his friend's bankers are. *They'll* know where the yacht is or where it's going! People on long cruises have to arrange with their bankers to send them money at the ports they mean to touch at. Circular notes, I think

they're called. I've done enough yachting to know that!" She jumped up again, seized Jackie in her arms and cried, "You poor little darling! But it's all right! I'll find Mervyn for you, even if he's at the other end of the world!"

Grandison put his head in at the door.

"Now, then," he complained. "Are n't you coming back to the studio, Jackie? I want to finish your portrait during my lifetime. Come along."

Jackie kissed Irene and followed him out. She danced down the stairs into the studio and on to the model throne, settling into her pose with a joyful bound. Grandison was conscious of a subtle change in her, conscious of some alteration in her expression.

"Paint out that sadness from my eyes, Grand-John," she cried, gaily. "I am another Jackie now!"

XXXVIII

VIRGINIA sat in the loggia of her house at Yonkers. To be precise it was Sam's house. If the term "clod" had ever fitted him, which is doubtful, he certainly had not manifested anything of the clod's stupidity in the choice of an abode for Virginia and himself. It was an entirely delightful house, pleasantly old-fashioned, and its trellised front was just now breaking out into the delicate green and pink of japonica. A superb view of rolling woodland, silvery river, and distant purple hills faced Virginia. She often compared this satisfying prospect with the view at Grange Sutton or Blenshay House, those trim but restricted demesnes of her titled days, and not to their advantage. The fact is that Virginia had reverted to type and done so as naturally as a duck deprived of water revels in it once more.

She was thinking regretfully of Sam cooped up on such a fine spring day in his office in New York, unable except at week-ends to share with her the best hours of this sylvan existence, when she observed a tall man slowly making his way up the drive. Sam was tall, but he was also stoutish, and she did not therefore jump to the conclusion that wishing for his presence had resulted in a pleasant miracle. This man was very thin and he did not walk with Sam's firm tread. The brim of his hat shaded his face, and as the sun was in Virginia's eyes she did not apprehend who he was until he got within twenty yards of her. Then, with a low cry of surprise and pained concern, she started out of her chair and hurried to meet him.

"Mervyn!" she exclaimed. "Is it really you?"

Carter smiled wanly as he kissed her.

"No, only a caricature just now, Virgie. But I dare say I shall improve before long. Well, how are you? And how's Sam?"

"Oh, never mind us," she replied fretfully. "Come and sit down. You look frightfully ill!" She held his arm until he was safely ensconced in one of the deep chairs in the loggia. "Where *have* you been all this long while? It's nearly a year since I had a line from you. What has happened to you?"

"Nothing very much. Cruising about the Seven Seas. Lotus-eating most of the time. I'm just tired, Virgie."

"But you're so appallingly thin. You look so weak. You look as if you badly wanted nursing and feeding up. Now at last that you are here you'll of course stay and get strong."

"Thanks, but I'm afraid not," he said languidly. "I had to come to New York to see about one or two business matters. I only heard on my arrival two days ago that you and Sam were married and living here. I thought I'd come and look you up before I leave."

"Leave! After two days! You really ought not to, Mervyn. You don't look fit to travel."

"I'm not fit to stand the push and bustle of a big city, my dear. Although I got a touch of malaria in Honduras I'm not really a sick man. At least not physically. 'Disgruntled' is the word that best expresses my particular state. The sea is the best remedy for it. The yacht's at moorings in New York Harbour. I've arranged to rejoin her at the end of the week. I shall be glad to get away from civilization again. I have n't the heart for it now. . . . When a man of my age gets the measles — or falls in love — it always takes it out of him. . . . But I'm ever so glad

to see you looking so happy, Virgie. You're a different woman."

"I've shed my prickles, Mervyn."

"They were only heraldic ones, conferred like your coronet, not inherent."

"I try to think so. I hope so. It took me ten years — ten long wasted years to find it out, though."

"You can afford to forget those years. You've got Sam. Good old Sam!" he exclaimed softly. "I shall be glad to see him again."

Virginia gave him a tender glance, partly in return for his eulogy of Sam, restrained in expression though it was, partly for his own sake. His appearance grieved her. He looked so broken and careworn. Sisterly compassion and feminine curiosity struggled within her for mastery. She wanted so very much to hear him speak intimately of himself; she wanted a disclosure of the reasons of his long absence and his long silence, both of which she very well knew bore upon his attitude towards Jackie. She waited for this disclosure as patiently as she could, knowing that his reticence was not to be forced.

"Yes, I'm lucky to have Sam," she gladly admitted. "Do you know, Mervyn, I can hardly realize that a year ago I was an English countess. It seems like a dream, an illusion."

"We all have illusions," he said, with a grave nod. "The worst of it is we never recognize what they are until they are gone. You're well off, Virginia. Your illusion was easily got over. It was only a case of misdirected ambition. You thought you were cut out for an exalted position. At least you've had the satisfaction of experiencing what it was like. You've had your triumphs. You've been to the top of the ladder you set out to climb. You've gathered your sheaf of social bays. You've tasted

the joys of achievement. And now you can look back without any regrets, except for the loss of a few years that you can easily spare. Some of us are not so fortunate." Without any appreciable pause he added: "Do you ever hear of Jacqueline?"

The abruptness of the question took Virginia by surprise. She had expected to approach that subject only by subtle degrees.

"Yes," she stammered. "She's in Paris. We saw her there — Sam and I — in December. Not to speak to; only at the theatre. She was just as great a success there as in London. They idolized her."

"Has she married?"

She made an attempt to read his face, but it told her nothing.

"From what I know of her," she said pointedly, "she's as little likely to do that as you are."

"What *you* know of her! What can you know? You've only spoken to her once in your life."

"But I constantly hear of her. Irene writes me. I had a long letter from her all about Jackie less than a week ago. But you must have heard from her, too."

"No, she has n't written to me. Nor I to her. Besides, I've been out of the track of letters."

"I know she wrote to you through your bankers. To Callao."

"We did n't touch there."

"But surely her letter would be forwarded on to wherever it was you were going next?"

"Probably it was. But we made a complete change of route. After leaving San Francisco we went through the Panama Canal and on to Honduras instead of to Callao as we intended."

An exclamation of disappointment broke from Virginia.

"Don't distress yourself, old girl," Carter said. "I shall get Irene's letter some time or other. I don't suppose there was anything in it of vital importance."

"But there was! It was all about Jackie!"

Carter gave a resigned sigh. "Now you're distressing me. You don't mean to, I know. It has been difficult enough to drill myself to take only an extrinsic interest in Jackie. My enquiry about her did n't mean more than that."

Virginia leant forward in her chair and spoke incisively:

"Tell me, Mervyn. Do you care nothing more about her? Have you no love left for her at all? Honestly?"

It seemed an age before he answered and then she saw by his face the effort it cost him.

"No, Virginia, I don't say that. I wish I could. I should be a happier man. Unfortunately I have n't the blessed capacity of deceiving myself. I envy the people who can."

"But you *do* deceive yourself! You made a hideous mistake about Jackie. All this long while you've been doing her a terrible injustice. That is what Irene explained in the letter you never got."

But she spoke to deaf ears. Carter, with that dreadful picture of Jackie lying quiescent in the arms of an unspeakable man burnt into his brain, answered her with sceptical bitterness.

"Irene may explain, but to convince me that the mistake is mine is beyond her."

"Then let *me* try," Virginia pleaded. And though she had to do it under all the disadvantages of second-hand knowledge, regret for her uncharitable treatment of Jackie made her eloquent. She revealed Bowman's sinister designs; accounted for his presence in her flat, and gave him the true explanation of the miserable situation

that ensued there. She made every allowance for Jackie's obdurate refusal to defend herself, and by implication reproached Carter for his want of faith. Jackie could not have pleaded her own cause half so well.

"What stands out is this," she asserted in conclusion. "Jackie has all along been the victim of her own loyal little heart. She's as good as gold. I misjudged her. You condemned her unjustly. Won't you admit that and ask her forgiveness? I lost ten years of my life through a mistake; you've been let off with only as many months. Don't tempt Providence, Mervyn. I do so want to be the one to bring you and Jackie together again, because it was I who tried so hard to keep you apart. You say the yacht is waiting for you. Why not go straight back to Europe to her — and to happiness?"

Her final appeal eluded Carter. He was too startled by her disclosures about Bowman to think of anything else. He did not question their truth, but his mind was numbed by their relation. His soul shivered at the thought of what this man's domination had meant to Jackie and what it had inflicted on himself. The light of truth had come upon him too abruptly. In spite of his denial he was really ill. Physical infirmity reacted on his mind. His confidence failed him. He had done Jackie a wrong that agonized him, but could he retrieve it? Shame and depression, bodily and mental, answered in the negative.

"To ask her forgiveness is the least I can do," he said, forlornly. "And although I do not deserve it I know she will give it. But what else is there? Perhaps her pity; certainly her contempt. Scorn was in her voice that day when we parted. I hear it still; I am always hearing it. Well," he sighed, "she deserves a better man than I. It would be strange if, by this time, she had not come across him."

"Oh, don't talk like that, Mervyn!" Virginia expostulated. "Where has your courage gone? Jackie loves you. Irene is sure of it."

"A woman's special pleading, Virginia," was the hopeless rejoinder. "No, I can't go to her. It would hurt too much. And it would only distress her. But you can do me a favour. Will you write and tell her that I know all and that I am — abject?"

The relevancy of the word almost made Virginia lose heart.

"But if I can bring you proof of what I say: that you are wrong: that she still cares for you? What then?"

For one short moment an eager look came into Carter's face and then it died out.

"Don't raise false hopes, my dear. Life does n't pan out like a story-book. Its bitterness and disappointments don't permit of happy endings. That is why we drug ourselves with pleasant fiction in order to forget painful realities for a little while."

Virginia laid a soothing hand on his shoulder.

"In the Book of Life there must be many happy endings," she asserted, with quiet conviction, "or there would be no Paradise. Have faith, Mervyn."

XXXIX

VIRGINIA had not exaggerated when she said that Jackie was idolized in Paris. London may have adopted her, but Paris claimed her as its own. Was she not French? Were not her father and brothers sacrificed on the altar of patriotism? Had not her mother been made a fugitive by the *sales Boches*? These credentials, supplied by Calderon in advance, had ensured her a welcome. Her charm, her beauty, and her talent had made of that welcome a triumph. From the first, Paris had acclaimed and adored her. Her opening season had had to be prolonged. Her salary had been doubled. She drew crowds; she was the rage.

She had a multitude of friends all of whom were her admirers, but her virginal heart tolerated no lovers. She lived to give pleasure. Her dancing was now better than ever; her dramatic ability seemed to grow and grow. Her reputation was not of the theatre only. The "Jacqueline hat" and the "Jacqueline shoe" had a *succès fou*. Her hats especially appealed to every Parisienne. They revolutionized the millinery trade. They were immense, they were picturesque, and they brought grist to the mills of the *couturières* of the Rue de la Paix and the Rue Castiglione. Her taste in dress was approved in the Quartier St.-Germain and travestied at the Bal Bullier.

At this time Jackie was devoting more and more of her large salary to charitable purposes. Her benefactions were made covertly, but it soon came to be known that she never listened to a tale of pity unsympathetically. Yet she was so loved and esteemed that she was not unduly duped by those whose business in life it is to impose on the

generous. Moreover, her common sense and an innate capacity for sifting the good from the bad and the false from the true safeguarded her from extortion. Her private reputation was unassailable. Scandal passed her by. Finding that her reputation was irreproachable, Parisian society opened its doors to her. This was a phenomenal departure; for in Paris, outside of Bohemian circles, the actress is not "received."

In Paris Jackie did not forget her promised cenotaph to the memory of Benny. She established a small home for crippled children with the idea of enlarging it as her income increased. Every day she spent an hour there. The little ones adored her, called her "Petite Maman." The endearing term was more to her than the applause she got at night.

She wept when at last Calderon bade her prepare to leave Paris.

"But I am domiciled here!" she declared. "How can I depart and leave my babies and all my friends?"

"They'll wait for you," he promised. "There's no reason why you should n't make Paris your headquarters; but I'm under contract to present you across the water. You've made good in London and here. But you can't wear the blue ribbon of universal triumph till America has sat in judgment on you. You must have the New York hall-mark. A London reputation is all very well. Once you've taken London's fancy it will go on believing in you and applauding you even if you developed web-feet. There's no discrimination about London. I say that, although I'm cockney-born. Paris is infinitely more critical; but being French, half your battle was won here in advance. In America, the fact that you're Jacqueline from the Diplomats' Theatre, London, and the Alcazar, Paris, won't of itself ensure you success. You've got to

earn it there. America's the land of the free and unprejudiced. It's mighty hospitable, but in art it's exacting. You can't plant duds in America, though America does that pretty frequently in England. As far as you are concerned I've no fears. So we're sailing next month."

Jackie made ready after that. Deep in her heart she had a tender regard for America and everything American. Was not her lost Merveen *indigène* to that vast country across the sea? She wondered whether by any chance he would be in New York when she opened there. She wondered whether he and she would ever meet again. She wondered . . . and told her heart to be still. What was the good of wondering? The past with its episodic idyll was done with. Now, like Caliwowska, she lived solely for her art. She schooled herself to believe so, at any rate, but in her inmost heart she knew, as every woman fully endowed with the attributes of her sex knows, that art alone cannot satisfy all the yearnings of nature. Art in her case had now become a makeshift, a pretence. It was good to possess talent, and through it to give pleasure to others; but how infinitely more desirable was love! — love and a home and children! Like the Princess of Rossetti's poem, Jackie, although far from being king-descended, envied a peasant with a baby at her breast. . . .

In April of that year she sailed from Cherbourg. The vastness and the mystery of the ocean were an endless source of wonder to her. She would sit on deck by the hour watching its ever-changing permanence; the screaming sea-birds of yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow; the momentum of the long titanic rollers that came from nowhere and disappeared nowhither; the sapphire of their depths and the delicate green of their crests. She discovered elemental music in the throb of the screw and the

twang of the wind in the wire stays. Passing vessels greatly stirred her imagination. She held silent communion with their unseen human freight; knew she was thinking their thoughts, sharing in a reciprocal speculation.

Once in mid-ocean she was accorded the unforgettable view of a large and beautiful auxiliary yacht on its way to some European port. The day was fine and clear; the distance between the two ships no more than half a mile. The yacht under a cloud of dazzling white canvas canted to the steady breeze so that her deck was visible. Jackie could distinguish several figures on it, particularly those of three men amidships. One of them lay on what appeared to be a camp bedstead. When the liner's flag was dipped to the white ensign flying at his vessel's gaff this one slowly raised his cap.

That salutation stirred Jackie strangely. It seemed personal, for her alone. It aroused in her that vague, mysterious sense as of things previously known and experienced, of a spiritual convergence with something affinitive, something dear. She felt a tightening of the heart, she knew not why. And when the yacht passed out of sight, a white speck glittering in the sun, her eyes were wet with tears.

Thus all unknowing did Carter and Jackie, playthings of Destiny, impend on one another amid a waste of waters and diverge again.

In New York Jackie's success was crystallized. Nothing like her had been seen there before. To a public surfeited by ballet, Italian and Russian in succession, she was a welcome novelty. Her dancing, though based on both styles, was unlike either. It was less academic, more irresponsible, acutely personal and joyous. "An elf come to life," "a flower in motion," were two of the many phrases used to describe her. She was delighted by the

chorus of favourable opinion; she enjoyed life hugely in New York.

One hot afternoon at the beginning of June, on her return to the hotel where she was staying, she found Virginia awaiting her. Memories of their stormy meeting eighteen months ago in Mervyn's flat made her a little dignified. She knew nothing of Virginia's re-marriage; she had not even heard of her departure from England.

Virginia's frigid manner was a thing of the past; she had shed it with her title. At Jackie's entrance her hand went out and a friendly smile came into her face.

"You are wondering that I should come to see you," she said on a note of contrition. "Will you be generous and try to forget that you have a grievance against me?"

"Madame la Comtesse, I am not such a gavroche," was Jackie's rejoinder.

"I am ashamed of ever having called you that. It was horribly vulgar of me. I am here partly to apologize for it. But please do not give me a title. I am plain Mrs. Sam Curtis now. I have married again, and I live at Yonkers-on-the-Hudson, a little way out of the city."

Virginia's humility extinguished every atom of Jackie's hostility.

"I hope you are very happy," she said: and added demurely, "and I also ask your pardon for those cabbages."

Virginia thanked her, made light of the cabbage incident, and then said:

"May I speak to you of my brother — of Mervyn?"

Jackie tightened her lips.

"I hope he is well," she murmured after a pause; and as Virginia was not ready with an answer she was impelled to ask, "You have had news of him?"

"He was here two months ago."

"Here?"

"In April. He left New York for England in the Vettura, a friend's yacht, on the 3d."

Jackie's heart beat tumultuously. A frantic calculation was going on in her mind. A yacht westward-bound on the 3d of April from New York would be in mid-Atlantic about a week later. That would make it the 11th. It was on the 11th of April — for some unknown reason she had made a mental note of the date — that she had watched with such strange fascination and incomprehensible pathos the passing of a big white yacht! She knew now why she had been so moved; why the tears had welled into her eyes! She knew — she was *certain* — that a kind and yet a cruel fate had for a few fleeting minutes permitted her a distant view of one whom she had once so dearly loved — whom she would always love in spite of everything! She was assured that his salutation had been meant for her, little as he could have intended it. And then as she recalled his posture, almost flat, there came to her the dread conviction that he must have been weak and ill.

"You have not yet told me how he is!" she cried, impetuously.

"I came to tell you and to give you a message from him," Virginia said. "I should have come before had I not been away. Mervyn is the ghost of his old self. I hardly recognized him when he came to see me. He had been down with fever. His spirit seems quite broken. For nearly a year he has been at sea, out of the world. He asked about you. I could only tell him you were in Paris. It was all I knew. But I told him what I had heard from Irene — how she had discovered the cause of your misunderstanding with him. I gave him the whole story. If you could have seen the self-reproach in his face! He

wants your forgiveness. He asked me to write and say that, now he knows everything, — the truth, — he is abject. He said he could not face you himself. He was afraid of your contempt. I did write to you, but you must have left Paris before my letter got there. I see by your face that you never received it. But Mervyn loves you. I asked him and he could not deny it. Perhaps he meant to tell you so himself when he got back to Europe. He was so anxious to be gone. He knew no more than I did that you were coming over here. And since then — since he arrived in London — he has been ill. Oh, so ill! This morning I had a cable from Irene. He is no better. Indeed, he is worse. Oh, my dear, if you still care enough, do go to him, I beg of you! If you have it in your heart to forgive him, to tell him so with your own lips, it would mean so very much. I believe he would get well again. I do, indeed! Can you, will you go?"

Jackie had risen to her feet when she asked her question. Anxiety had kept her standing. When Virginia spoke of Irene's cable her heart turned to water. Mervyn ill! Mervyn perhaps at the point of death while she, as though nothing else mattered, had been dancing for the edification of a world of strangers! A great sob shook her.

"I will go to him at once!" she cried desperately. "Oh, madame, say that I shall not be too late!"

Thankful that her persuasion had so quickly succeeded, Virginia spoke hopefully and calmed her fears.

"The *Laurentia* sails to-morrow. Can you be ready in time?" she asked. "Can you cancel your engagement? What will your manager say?"

What did managers matter to Jackie? Nothing mattered! She would have broken her faith with God to save her Mervyn!

"Yes, yes," she fretted. "Shall I cable to him that I come?"

"I will do that. I'll let Irene know." Virginia moved to the door. "I must n't delay you. Jackie, will you kiss me?" she asked, contritely.

Jackie opened her arms.

While Virginia was descending in the lift Jackie burst in upon Calderon who had a suite of rooms in the hotel.

"Hullo! What's up?" he demanded.

"It is to let you know that to-night I dance, but to-night only! To-morrow I go to London!"

Calderon was astonished, but he did not protest. Once before he had done so and come off badly. He took it for granted that Jackie had some weighty reason for wanting to get away. She had never previously shirked a performance. She had an ironbound sense of duty. Something stronger than duty must be behind her amazing decision, some overruling motive comparable to the one that had fired ambition in himself twenty years ago to do great things for the woman he loved. Love, the lodestar of the world, must surely be plucking at Jackie's heart-strings now. It was the only influence that could explain her state of excitation.

But her sudden determination to leave America did not impose on him the catastrophe it implied. Indeed, it almost squared with his own inclinations. For more than a week past he had been considering the advisability of bringing her New York engagement to a close. The weather was beginning to be oppressive. People were going out of town. Soon New York would be empty and business would flag. He was anxious to get back to London himself. His mind was occupied with his next big scheme — a colossal production, a super-ballet — which was to provide Jackie with her apotheosis.

"All right," he said. "But won't you tell me what's got you all of a sudden?"

"I am in grief," she lamented. "I fear to lose one so dear to me. Oh, my friend, let me go!"

Calderon took her hands.

"I won't keep you," he said. "And calm your fears, little girl. You've always told me that God is good to Jackie. I can well believe it. So don't have any doubts that He won't stand by you now."

XL

IN Sassoni's already overcrowded abode yet another bambino had made its appearance, and his wife, freed for a fortnight from organ-dragging, found other work for her weary arms to do.

"Dio mio!" sighed her better half, as he brought her the basin of fish-flavoured beans and oil which he had been concocting. "It is five to feed now! When will my family cease to become as the sands of the sea? And of what use is a woman or a monkey as a help to a struggling man? Both are for ever sick! Three monkeys have I had, all dead of pneumonia, and another of mange. How is money to be saved to pay for our return to Napoli and the purchase of a piece of land to grow vegetables on?"

"Thank the Holy Virgin thou art in a country where vegetables are cheaper to buy than to grow," his wife retorted. "To-day in Italia one starves."

"As for that, one starves here with all these mouths for ever open and never satisfied. And the organ is sick as well as thou. Its inside is dislocated from overwork. People put their fingers to their ears when I play. Never has it made earnings since the time of Jackie."

"How often have I not told thee to go to her? Did she not give me a good shawl and to thee a whole English pound? She would again be charitable if she knew I had but just given birth to another son. But whenever I speak of her there comes a frown to thy face. One would think thou hast a reason for avoiding her."

Sassoni frowned now, but it was more a frown of disappointment than anything else.

"I would go to her fast enough if I knew where to find

her," he confessed. "She is no longer at the house in Green Street. I have been there to see." He sighed lugubriously. "Always did she bring me good luck. Silver in the tambourine when she danced; bank notes when she no longer danced."

Mrs. Sassoni pricked up her ears.

"One note she gave thee at her palazzo. Of what others dost thou speak?"

"Thou knowest well enough that I was to receive five pounds for giving her address to the man with the fur on his coat — the one on whom I was avenged. Did I not show them to thee?"

Her dark eyes widened. She had never associated the acquisition of those five notes with Jackie.

"And for that thou didst risk thy neck in a rope noose?" Her usually submissive voice expressed contempt. "Mother of God! what induced thee to commit such folly? To betray one so generous?"

"The man tempted me," he muttered unconsciously paraphrasing an earlier delinquent. "For the rest, I rid her of one who could have desired her no good. Doubtless he was enamoured of her and she perhaps had no liking for him. *Da vero*, in disposing of him I did her a service. One day perhaps she will repay me for the deliverance."

Very much of a sophist was Sassoni. According to him the obligation was all on one side — his side. Certainly he had derived advantage from Jackie in the past. Recollections of that spacious week eighteen months ago when her tambourine overflowed with silver money made his mouth water. But he had paid her a fair wage and made no charge for the coloured scarf for her head, the piece of velvet for a bodice, and the alteration to the rest of her dress. He spoke as though he and not his wife had conferred these favours on her. Also, if she had brought him

good fortune had he not brought her better? He had heard it spoken that she had become a ballerina in a theatre and was paid — who knew? — perhaps five or ten pounds a week! It was incredible that she could have reached such heights of prosperity unless some impresario had observed her dancing to the music of his organ.

All this in an aggrieved tone he delivered himself of while he did the housework. It consisted of smearing unwashed pots and plates with a greasy rag, and heaping the floor-débris into a corner. He finished by throwing to the cat a fragment of meat bone, which his two eldest children, quicker than the four-footed animal that shared the floor with them, pounced on and fought for. Sassoni did not interfere. He picked up his hat preparatory to starting on his daily round with the organ.

But before he could get to the door it was opened from the outside and Jackie walked in. Sassoni stopped short. His eyes bulged. The coincidental marvel of his thoughts and her entrance was too much for him. His guilty conscience assured him that she must have discovered that old treachery of his and had come to accuse him of it. He stood looking at her shiftily.

But Jackie's manner reassured him. She was all smiles; she gave him and his a cheerful "good-morning." She also slipped off the cloak that covered her and — wonder of wonders! — disclosed herself clad in the identical dress she had worn when she danced to his organ. Sassoni's hand went up to his astonished eyes.

"You have your organ still?" she demanded.

"Si, si," he nodded rapidly.

"Then I will dance to it for a little while in the street."

"Che? Veramente! You speak-a true?" he gasped.

"Yes. It is a caprice. For amusement."

Sassoni could not believe his ears. She would dance

for amusement? What could she mean? If only for amusement, then she would not demand much payment. The less the better. The prospect of haggling helped his startled mind to regain some of its ballast. The tambourine would again rattle with silver money. He took it from the nail on the wall where for so long it had hung unused.

"We make a bargain," he said, rattling it. "So much for me, so much for you. Let us arrange."

Jackie waved the suggestion aside.

"It is not worth the trouble," she informed him. "I dance but for an hour or so. And for that I pay."

From a bag on her wrist she took a bundle of notes and presented them to him. "Come. First I will kiss the new little baby and then we will go."

A look of deep tenderness was in her face as she bent over it. The kiss she gave it was a benediction. How rich was this Italian mother to have so many babies of her own! Kindly words she spoke. She would come again and bring jellies and beef tea: new clothes also for the little ones. Just now she was in a great hurry. She had arrived but yesterday from America, and before doing anything else she wished to dance. She only waited for Sassoni.

By this time Sassoni had secreted the notes in various inaccessible recesses of his clothing. He was entirely at her service. Truly Jackie had always brought him luck! He was all smiles, all flash of white teeth. The rings in his ears vibrated to his good fortune.

Out in the street he bent himself nearly double in his anxiety to propitiate her. He wished to know where she would prefer to dance: in the small streets, the big and busy streets, or the selecter ones where lived the rich and the great?

"Follow me," Jackie answered. "And make haste!
Oh, make haste!"

Obediently Sassoni trundled on in the wake of her flying feet.

XLI

A LONG illness — of the mind as well as the body — had played havoc with Carter's nerves. The slightest annoyance made him captious; hardly anything stimulated his interest. Irene had done her best; she had nursed him with the devotion of a sister; but nothing now availed to rouse him from his spells of dull apathy or allay his febrile irritation.

The one remedy that would have restored him to health and spirits she did not dare to prescribe. This, of course, was Jackie. But Carter had prohibited Jackie as a subject of conversation. She and his love for her had together become to him the epitome of all hopelessness. Apart from a state of health that had steeped him in pessimism other reasons were accountable for this unhappy frame of mind. For three months now he had been ardently hoping to hear from Virginia that Jackie had at least forgiven him. He had had letters from Virginia, but in them there was no word of Jackie. He could not know (because he had not been told) that Virginia's letter to Paris had missed its destination; that she had been away from Yonkers and so was unaware of Jackie's arrival in New York; and that because she herself had given up hope of being able to bring about the reconciliation she so much desired she purposely refrained from making any reference to Jackie in order to spare his feelings.

And yet all this while, as he knew, Jackie was in New York! Within an hour's journey of Yonkers! If Virginia, who had pleaded so earnestly on Jackie's behalf, now found it advisable to refrain from speaking of her there

could be but one inference — the miserable inference that Jackie was indifferent to him!

So whenever Irene broached the subject its effect on Carter was disastrous. It only made him suffer. Of late she had avoided it, but all yesterday it had been on her tongue and she had seemed bent on harrowing his feelings. She had also seemed unaccountably excited. She had done nothing but put a variety of supposititious questions, and he had been unable to silence her. Did n't he care what became of Jackie? What would he do if he were assured that she forgave him? What would he say if she walked in and told him that she still loved him? Distracted by this Tantalus-like inquisition he had at last said:

"What is the use of all this assumption? I've told you over and over again that I know exactly how she regards me. At the best, with lukewarm interest. Well, I've resigned myself to it."

"But you told Virginia —"

"I was ill. She worked on my feelings. Do be sensible, Irene, and face the facts. You and Virginia are too susceptible to emotion. You don't reason. Jackie has had a year in which to decide on what she thinks is best for herself. Surely it's easy to see what that decision is."

In short, Carter was perverse. Irene, in the position of the goddess in the car with the skid on, had to hold her tongue. She left him, but in the evening returned to ask him to lend her the Italian dress which she had seen in a drawer of his bureau. She wanted it for a friend.

Carter hated to seem ungracious. That old dress of Jackie's was his only remaining memento of her; too precious to part with.

"I'm awfully sorry to refuse you," he said. "But your friend can get a far more effective dress from any cos-

tumier. Mine is hardly suitable as a fancy costume. It's old and patched. Only Jackie could look picturesque in it."

"My friend is an actress," Irene explained, "and wants to look the real thing. A contadina. Never mind, though."

When she had gone Carter felt he had been rather boorish. Still, Irene ought to have comprehended how precious that one remaining relic had become to him. She seemed to be wanting in sensitiveness. To-day especially she had been provokingly mercurial. The mood affected him adversely. What he most desired was peace and quietness, an undisturbed mind. He sought it in the nepenthe of bed and sleep.

But in the morning he was still under the influence of the same disturbing irritability. He could not get over Irene's astonishing request of the night before. That she should expect him to lend her those treasured garments to oblige a stranger struck him as a psychological aberration. Irene was not generally obtuse. He finished his apology for a breakfast and went to the bureau. Not often now did he open the drawer where lay those ghost-haunted garments of a bitter-sweet past. He would just take a glimpse of the coloured scarf, just touch the velvet bodice! Then, more clearly he would visualize his lost Jackie as he remembered and loved her: spring and joy incarnate dancing to the crazy tune of a piano-organ in the street!

He opened the drawer. It was empty!

So, in spite of his refusal, Irene had taken the dress! Carter bitterly resented the action. The obligation he was under to her was no excuse for it. To think of some strange woman wearing those garments was more than distasteful; it was sacrilege! When they came back there would be a taint about them. They would not be the

same: something of their association with Jackie would be gone. . . .

The quietness of the street was suddenly broken. A piano-organ of more than usual discordance had struck up under the windows of the flat. It was thrumming an air from "Spatch-Cock." Every now and again the mechanism failed: whole bars were missed out.

The well-remembered tune unmanned Carter. It was like a painful commentary on the emptiness of the drawer — missing dress, effaced hopes, shattered melody. For all that, he went to the window. He never let an organ-grinder go away empty-handed. Had not his little Jackie danced for one of them?

As he looked below his heart paused in its beat, then raced and throbbed. For there in the roadway, in the full sunlight, *was* Jackie! Jackie in the missing dress, her curls flying! Jackie of the twinkling feet — her very self — dancing!

For ebullient moments Carter stood irresolute. In the fever that had so weakened him he had again and again seen her looking as tangible as this, as tantalizingly real. . . . Was this another fevered dream? Her swaying tambourine rose above her head as though in answer. He heard its joyous tinkle. A step or two and she left the roadway; was on the pavement beneath him; had disappeared from sight. . . .

With every nerve tingling, with pulses going at high pressure, Carter faced about, his eyes fixed on the door, straining his ears. . . . His entrance bell pealed. . . . Time seemed to stand still. . . . There came a light patter of feet. . . . They paused outside the door. . . . Slowly it swung inward and Jackie, a little timorous, one hand held to her heart, faltered for a second on the threshold and then flung herself into his arms.

"Oh, my little girl!" he cried. "Is it no dream? Is it really you?"

She pulled down his face to hers, wound her arms about his neck.

"Tell me, tell me, my Merveen! Say that I am forgiven!" she entreated.

"For what? For the joy you bring?"

"For my heart of a mule! For all my *bêtise*, my *entêtement*! Oh, I cannot think in English! I am too — too *ravie*! Say that I am still your Jackie! I have made a haste enormous from the time I saw Virginia in New York. I have entreated the man with the wheel on the ship to turn it quicker! I have implored the men in the stoking 'ole to make their fires *chauffés à blanc*! And at last I am arrived!" Her hands stroked his face. She made soft, quivering sounds, ecstatic and rueful by turns. "Oh, *mon adoré*, your face tell me you 'ave nearly die of my negligence! I will make you well. If you will be so amiable and marry me *à vue d'œil* — at the very once, I will care for you to a degree! I shall be your Red Cross and your *maison de santé* and your doctor and your servant all together!"

"My sweetest Jackie! My dearest dear!" Carter murmured. "I'm well already. I'm the happiest man alive! And so it was you who made Irene steal your own dress! You supreme little person! You Jackie to the end!"

Jackie nestled in his arms.

"Merveen," she whispered. "How often have I dream of this! That I am in your arms and that we have become *réunis*! In my sleep I have raised my face to you — so — and the kiss you have given me has been almost on my lips, so that I have waked up with joy to find my pillow all wet with the tears of gladness. Oh, I greatly fear I shall wake so again!"

Abruptly she slipped to her knees. With folded hands and bowed head she prayed at Carter's knee, as a child prays, but silently. Carter's hand rested lovingly on her curly head. He also prayed, giving thanks for a wondrously happy ending to this best chapter in his Book of Life.

Jackie rose from her knees and put her hands in his.

"God has been good to Jackie," she said. "He releases me. Now I do not serve two masters."

Carter was mystified.

"Caliowska tell me that one cannot have love as well as art. I do not care. I give up the art. Love is enough."

"But your star? Your career? Jackie, sweetheart, you must not sacrifice that for me!"

Jackie's shoulders went up in the old adorable, characteristic way.

"I am a woman. That is my career!" she declared superbly.

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